Parents’ Perceptions of Stepfamily Cohesion

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# Introduction

High rates of divorce and repartnering mean that postdivorce stepfamilies are common in modern societies [@raley\_divorce\_2020]. When parents repartner after divorce, they are faced with multiple challenges. For example, parents need to adjust to their new partner and, at the same time, often feel responsible for fostering good relationships between their child and their new partner, who becomes - at least by definition - the child’s stepparent [@jensen2017transitioning]. Such processes of family reorganization are often complex and difficult, which is why parents might find it difficult to feel that their stepfamily is cohesive [@ganong2019stepfathers] [@pink1985problem] [@waldren1990cohesion]. Stepfamily cohesion refers to an overall perception of unity, closeness, and meaningful involvement regarding one’s stepfamily [@komter2006strength][@waldren1990cohesion] [@jensen2022associations]. Cohesion is the feeling that one’s stepfamily is a coherent and supportive unit, rather than a disjoint patchwork [@favez2015coparenting].

Cohesion is conceptually closely related to family belonging (i.e., individuals’ feelings that they are part of the family; see [@king2015adolescents]). Feelings of cohesion are important to investigate due to their contribution to family functioning and family members’ well-being. For example, divorced parents can profit from a more cohesive stepfamily in terms of higher perceived well-being and lower stress levels [@waldren1990cohesion]. This can, in turn, positively affect their parenting, which can benefit their children [@king2015adolescents]. Children growing up in more cohesive stepfamilies have been found to exhibit fewer behavioral problems and score higher on subjective well-being [@shigeto2014roles].

The limited literature on stepfamily cohesion has mostly focused on the consequences of (a lack of) stepfamily cohesion (e.g., [@duncan1994effects], [@hong2015interactive], [@shigeto2014roles]) rather than the antecedents of perceptions of stepfamily cohesion. The few studies that do consider factors contributing to perceptions of cohesion usually only consider the influences of the relationship qualities between different stepfamily member (e.g., [@jensen2022associations]). Furthermore, most of these studies only study perceptions of cohesion cohesion only in the most common stepfamily type (i.e., resident stepfather families, see e.g., [@favez2015coparenting], [@waldren1990cohesion]).

This stepfamily type is, however, becomming less and less the default. Stepfamilies have considerably diversified in recent decades, for example in terms of residence arrangements. Nowadays, an increasing share of parents opt for shared residence arrangements (i.e., joint physical custody) or (to a lesser extent) sole father residence [@poortman2017shared]. Consequently, more parents experience their children living only part-time with them or mostly with their ex-partners, which can have important ramifications for how cohesive parents perceive their stepfamily. This picture can become even more complicated when one considers that in many postdivorce stepfamilies parents have a shared biological child with the new partner, and their new partners can also have children from their previous relationship, who also follow a residence arrangement. Such postdivorce stepfamily diversity is pivotal to consider as it could reveal stepfamily constellations that are particularly prone to be considerd as less cohesive than others, with potentially detrimental consequences for parents and their children living in those types of stepfamilies.

In this study, we comprehensively investigate parents’ perceptions of stepfamily cohesion in diverse stepfamilies using large-scale survey data. We, first, consider differences between parents who do and who do not have a shared biological child with their current partners vis-a-vis perceptions of cohesion. Second, we consider parents’ biological child’s and potential stepchildrens’ residence arrangements. For this study, we used the third wave of the New Families in the Netherlands (NFN) survey, collected in 2020 (N=3,056). NFN is a longitudinal survey based on a probability sample of Dutch parents who divorced or separated in 2009/10. Using this data provides the unique opportunity to investigate parents’ feelings of cohesion across a wide range of postdivorce families, such as those with shared residence arrangements.

# Theoretical Background

In the following, we outline our theoretical arguments regarding how and why postdivorce stepfamily structure could influence parents’ perceptions of stepfamily cohesion. We present our arguments from the vantage point of the so-called “focal parent” (i.e., the respondent). The focal parents are all divorced and have a biological child from their previous relationship. That child follows a residence arrangement (sole mother/father residence or shared residence). Subsequently, the focal parents entered a stable, coresidential relationship (i.e., they cohabit or a married) and thereby formed a stepfamily.

We start by describing the potential influence that having a shared biological child has on perceptions of cohesion, before describing potential group differences between focal parents’ biological children’s residence arrangements and residence arrangements of the stepchild (i.e., children from the current partners’ former union).

## Having a shared biological child

Upwards trends in remarriage and multipartner fertility imply that many repartnered parents go on to having a shared biological child with their current partner [@lappegaard2018intergenerational]. For two main reasons, having such a shared biological child can increase parents’ perceptions of stepfamily cohesion.

One line of argument is based on the presence of a shared biological child influencing perceptions of cohesion via relationship quality. Parents might deliberately seek to have a biological child with their current partner to improve and stabilize the relationship with him or her (i.e., the so-called “cement” or “concrete” baby). While doing so has been shown to potentially have have negative consequences of their existing biological childrens’ well-being [@sanner2018half], studies investigating parents’ accounts have found a positive association between having a shared child and the quality of the relationship with their new partner [@ivanova2019cementing]. As relationship satisafction has, in turn, been demonstrated to increase perceptions of stepfamily cohesion ([@jensen2022associations] [@king2015adolescents] [@king2016factors], one would expect that having a shared biological child is positively related to perceptions of cohesion.

Another line of argument is based on shared children changing parents’ family values and perceptions of their family in a more systemic way. The birth of a shared biological child is a subtantial family structure transition, that prompts all family members to renegotiate role, boundaries, expectations, shared norms and values, and family rituals and routines [@coleman2013resilience]. For example, whereas roles and boundaries in stepfamilies tend to be permeable and - to an extent - ambiguous [@fine1992perceived], the birth of a common child can clarify roles and boundaries as stepfamily members become biologically related to one another ([@anderson1999sibling] [@pasley1989boundary]). This is in line with findings from studies showing that the birth of a common child reduces uncertainty about one’s family ([@downs2004family], [@friedman1994theory]), leading to more positve evaluations of ones family environment. Having a shared child might also make shared norms and values more concrete, as norms towards biologically related kin are stronger than those towards non-related kin. The birth of a shared child might also give parents the impression that their family is now “real”, as it corresponds more closely to the societal sterotype of what a family is, i.e., the nuclear family. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1: Parents who have a shared biological child with their partner perceive higher extents of stepfamily cohesion than those who do not have a shared child.

## Residence of Focal Parent’s Biological Child

Whereas focal parents’ potential children with their current partners will - by definition - live in their common household, their biological children with their previous partners and potential stepchildren (so their current partner’s biological children from their previous relationship) can follow different postdivorce residence arrangements.

### Residence of Focal Parents’ Biological Child with the Previous Partner

In the Netherlands, three residence arrangements are common: sole mother residence (about two thirds), shared residence (i.e., joint physical custody; about one quarter), and sole father residence [@poortman2017shared]. Therefore, the focal parent might be a resident parent (i.e., the biological child resides mostly in his/her household), a nonresident parent (i.e., the biological child might reside mostly in the household of the ex-partner), or a part-time resident parent (i.e., the child lives about half of the time in the focal parent’s and half of the time in the ex-partner’s household).

Nonresident parents likely perceive the lowest extent of stepfamily cohesion. For once, nonresident parents’ contact opportunities with their biological children are inherently limited - nonresident parents typically see their children only every (other) weekend [@kelly2007children]. SUch limited contact might mean that nonresident parents could feel that they are missing out on a substantial part of their children’s lives and feel that they are the “unimportant parent” ([@kielty2005mothers],[@stewart1999disneyland]. Furthermore, they also have fewer opportunities for forming a new stepfamily comprising their biological child, their current partner, and themselves due to time constraints or their children resisting such attempts [@jensen2015perceived]. In sum, due to their child living mostly outside of their own household, nonresident parents might in fact consider their stepfamily as factually nonexistent, let alone cohesive [@kielty2005mothers].

Part-time resident parents faces unique challenges in creating stepfamily cohesion. One the one hand, their child resides part-time in their own household, which gives focal parents greater opportunities to create a stepfamily, for example by incorporating their children into new family routines [@bakker2015family]. On the other hand, shared residence arrangements imply that the stepfamily is constantly in flux [@carlsund2014swedish]. Parents might experience their child constantly “entering and leaving” their family as stressful, as they have to regularly switch between a life with and without their child. Though some parents might appreciate such a clear distinction between time with and without their children [@botterman2015social], for others shared residence might be challenging [@walper2021shared]. The lack of stability and temporal compartmentalization of family life might make it difficult for part-time resident parents to feel a sense of cohesion.

Resident parents’ stepfamily situation corresponds most closely to what societal family values prescibe a family should look like: a couple plus a child living in the same household. This arrangement, thus, corresponds most closely to the pre-divorce situation, especially in terms of contact oppotunities. Resident parents see their children almost every day and can easily engage in family routines and rituals with them, such as having shared dinners ([@bakker2015family] [@waller2014residential]). Taken together, these factors could give focal parents the feeling that they are a “real”, cohesive, stepfamily [@weaver2010caught]. We, thus, hypothesize that:

H2a: Resident focal parents perceive the highest extent of stepfamily cohesion, followed by part-time resident focal parents, and, lastly, nonresident focal parents.

### Presence and Residence of Stepchildren

Whether focal parents have stepchildren and in which household such potential stepchildren live might substantially affect parents’ perceptions of stepfamily cohesion. If the focal parent’s current partner also has a child from a previous relationship, logically, both the focal parent and the current partner are simultaneously biological parents and stepparents.

On the one hand, it has been argued that both partners already having a child creates a “level playing field” [@fine1996clarity]. Both partners know what it means to be a parent, which might reduce frictions and somewhat clarify the otherwise ambiguous role of the stepparent. On the other hand, acquiring a stepchild is, for many parents, still an ambiguous gain [@jensen2021theorizing], which means that parents might be unclear about how to relate to their new stepchild and what the stepchild’s place in the family is. Such uncertainty about roles and boundaries might reduce parents’ perceptions that their stepfamily is a cohesive unit [@downs2004family]. Empirical studies investigating parents’ well-being, furthermore, overall point to having an additional stepchild being demanding and potentially detrimental to parents’ well-being. For once, establishing and negotiating relationships with a stepchild is an often long and difficult process [@ganong1999stepparents]. Studies have shown that many parents report feeling rejected by their stepchildren, and might suffer from depressive symptoms as a result ([@ganong2011patterns], [@shapiro2011parenting]). Feeling rejected by ones stepchild is, logically, likely also detrimental to perceiving one’s stepfamily as cohesive. Additionally, taking on additional parenting responsibilities might be stressful and time-consuming [@guzzo2019variation]. Futhermore, it might be stressful to concurrently perform the role of the biological parent and stepparent, especially in view of the stepparent role being up to negotiation with the current partner [@nomaguchi2020parenthood]. As a result, stepparents might be likely to experience role and coparenting strains, which may induce conflicts and disagreements with the current partner. Such conflicts likely being detrimental to feeling that one’s stepfamily is cohesive.

The extent to which such negative consequences of having stepchildren become salient likely differs by where their stepchild lives. Focal parents’ stepchildren can follow similar residence arrangements as those of their biological children. Hence, focal parents can have a nonresident stepchild, a part-time resident stepchild, or a resident stepchild. Focal parents with residential stepchildren are exposed more frequently and intensively to their stepchildren than are focal parents with nonresident or part-time resident stepchildren, which implies that they might be the ones perceiving the lowest extent to stepfamily cohesion. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H2b: Focal parents without stepchildren perceive the highest extent of stepfamily cohesion, followed by those with nonresident stepchildren, part-time resident stepchildren and, lastly, resident stepchildren.

# Data and Method

I calculated the N (with missing values on the relevant variables excluded, so this is the most conservative sample size.

| **Selection** | Sample size |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **N original** | 3056 |  |  |  |
| **N repartnered (mar/cohab)** | 1456 |  |  |  |
| **N at least one resident child (complete cases)** | 569 |  |  |  |
| **at least one resident child and focal child < 18** | 138 |  |  |  |

569 seems OK, but we could consider doing a sensitivity power analysis to be sure.

# References