

## Cognitive correlates of adjustment for mothers and stepfathers in stepfather families.

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### **Abstract:**

This study relates three types of cognitions--ambiguity of the stepfather role, an optimistic perspective on stepfamilies, and myths about stepfamilies--to two areas of satisfaction, namely, (step)parent-child relationships and family/ marital/personal life. Subjects were 27 mothers and 27 stepfathers who were married to each other about three years. Compared to stepfathers, mothers had a more optimistic perspective on stepfamilies, were less likely to endorse myths regarding step families, and reported greater satisfaction with (step)parent-child relationships. Generally, cognitions were related to family/marital/ personal life satisfaction for mothers and to satisfaction with stepparent-child relationships for fathers.

**Keywords:** stepfamilies | parenting | parent-child relationships | domestic relations | stepfathers | stepmothers

### **Article:**

This study relates three types of cognitions--ambiguity of the stepfather role, an optimistic perspective on stepfamilies, and myths about stepfamilies--to two areas of satisfaction, namely, (step)parent-child relationships and family/ marital/ personal life. Subjects were 27 mothers and 27 stepfathers who were married to each other about three years. Compared to stepfathers, mothers had a more optimistic perspective on stepfamilies, were less likely to endorse myths regarding stepfamilies, and reported greater satisfaction with (step)parent-child relationships. Generally, cognitions were related to family/ marital/ personal life satisfaction for mothers and to satisfaction with stepparent-child relationships for fathers.

Because divorce rates for persons remarried after a divorce are somewhat higher than those of persons married for the first time (Martin and Bumpass, 1989), there has been considerable interest in identifying the stressors unique to remarried persons that place them at risk for yet another experience of marital dissolution. The most salient stressors common to remarried persons involve stepchildren (Cherlin, 1978). Current estimates indicate that about 16% of

married couples have at least one stepchild (Moorman and Hernandez, 1989). In the absence of well-defined social roles for stepparents (Giles-Sims, 1987), delineating the stepparent role may involve conflict. Further, this conflict can pervade the stepfamily system because it is likely to involve the husband-wife, parent-child, and stepparent-stepchild subsystems, and extend to relationships between the parent/ stepparent and both the parents' ex-spouse and the ex-spouse's kin.

The focus of this study is on cognitions (e.g., perceptions, assumptions, beliefs, and explanations) specific to stepfather families and the relation between these cognitions and the satisfaction with life in a stepfamily for both spouses in stepfather families. Not only have cognitions been found to be related to individual adjustment (e.g., Beck, Rush, Shaw, and Emery, 1979), but they have also been linked to the development and maintenance of marital satisfaction (e.g., Kurdek, 1991).

Two related theories underscore the importance of cognitions in mediating satisfaction. The first theory has an intrapersonal focus and posits that dysfunctional emotional and behavioral responses are related to appraisals of life events that are invalid or are based on unreasonable standards (Baucom and Epstein, 1990). Further, cognitions are thought to influence how stress is perceived, how effective available coping strategies are thought to be for dealing with stress, and what specific coping strategies are used (Cohen and Edwards, 1989; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). This intrapersonal theory predicts that some cognitions would buffer the person against the negative effects of the stressor, while other cognitions would exacerbate the negative effects. For example, persons with an optimistic perspective on life, an internal locus of control, or a "hardy" personality may respond adaptively to stress (Cohen and Edwards, 1989), while those with a propensity for focusing on negative affectivity may not (Beck et al., 1979; Watson and Clark, 1984).

The second theory has an interpersonal focus and posits that cognitions are a critical component in the sequential flow of behavioral interactions. In their contextual model of marriage, Bradbury and Fincham (1988) argue that a spouse's behavior is filtered through the cognitions of the partner and that this filtering influences the partner's behavioral response to the spouse's initial behavior. Subsequent filtering of the partner's behavior by the spouse, in turn, colors the spouse's reaction to the partner's behavior, and so on. Support for this interpersonal theory comes from findings that cognitions relevant to relationship functioning are concurrently and prospectively related to marital satisfaction and that couples who separate and those who stay together differ in their cognitive profiles at the time of marriage (Kurdek, 1989, 1991).

Given the general importance of cognitions for satisfaction as discussed above, three kinds of cognitions specific to stepfather families are of interest in this study. These include perceptions of the ambiguity of the stepfather role, an optimistic perspective on life in a stepfather family, and myths regarding the functioning of stepfather families. Although the importance of these

particular cognitions has been emphasized in the clinical stepfamily literature (e.g., Leslie and Epstein, 1988; Visher and Visher, 1988), there is almost no supportive empirical evidence.

Ambiguity regarding the stepfather role is of interest because it has been described as the core difficulty encountered by most stepfather families (Fine and Schwebel, in press; Giles-Sims, 1987). According to literature in the field of organizational psychology, role ambiguity includes uncertainty about the scope of one's responsibilities, uncertainty about the particular behaviors needed to fulfill one's responsibilities, uncertainty about whose expectations for role behavior must be met, and uncertainty about the effects of one's actions on the well-being of oneself and of others (King and King, 1990).

An optimistic perspective on stepfamily living is of interest because such a general outlook might act as a buffer against some of the stresses experienced in stepfamilies (McCubbin and McCubbin, 1987; Scheier and Carver, 1985) as well as provide the mother and stepfather with a sense of efficacy (Bandura, 1986).

Finally, myths regarding stepfamily living are of interest in light of general findings and clinical observations that dysfunctional beliefs are negatively related to adjustment (Baucom and Epstein, 1990; Eidelson and Epstein, 1982; Roehling and Robin, 1986; Visher and Visher, 1988). Visher and Visher (1988) have identified common myths held by members of stepfamilies (e.g., beliefs that stepfamilies are equivalent to "biological parent" families, that stepfamily adjustment should be attained quickly, and that stepfamily members should instantly love one another). Endorsement of these myths may lead to unrealistic expectations regarding behavior that, in turn, may lead to deficits in communication and problem-solving skills.

Because previous studies have found that persons in first marriages and remarriages differ in their evaluations of some aspects of their lives (e.g., family relationships) but not in others (e.g., marital interactions) (White and Booth, 1985), satisfaction was assessed multidimensionally and included the areas of parenting, (step)parent-child relationships, family life, marriage, and one's personal life. These areas provide a rather comprehensive assessment of life in a stepfamily because they tap dyadic relationships ([step]parent-child and husband-wife), family system interactions (family), and intrapersonal functioning (personal life).

Given limited information on cognitions and satisfaction in stepfather families, the first purpose of this study is to assess differences between mothers and stepfathers on cognitions and satisfaction. Differences on these variables are of interest for two reasons. First, because there is consistent evidence of gender specialization in families in the areas of marriage, family life, and parenthood (Thompson and Walker, 1989), mothers and stepfathers are not likely to view life in a stepfamily similarly. Second, because competent stepfathers have been described as playing supportive "background" roles to mothers rather than taking direct action with regard to child care and child discipline (Bray, Berger, Silverblatt, and Hollier, 1987; Hetherington, 1989), differences between mothers and stepfathers in areas related to parenting warrant investigation.

The second purpose of this study is to assess the relation between cognition and satisfaction. Care was taken so that the content of the cognition measures did not overlap with that of the satisfaction measures (cf. Fincham and Bradbury, 1987). For both mothers and stepfathers, satisfaction was expected to be negatively related to high ambiguity regarding the stepfather role and to many myths regarding stepfamilies and positively related to optimism regarding life in a stepfamily.

## METHOD

### Subjects

Subjects were obtained from participants in an ongoing longitudinal study of relationship quality in newlyweds who were recruited from lists of marriage licenses published in a local newspaper (see Kurdek, 1989, for further details). All spouses in stepfather families still participating in the study ( $n = 31$ ) were sent surveys through the mail. In order to maximize the size of the sample, 12 pairs of spouses who had withdrawn from the larger study were also contacted, and 3 pairs agreed to participate. Completed surveys for both partners were returned in postage-paid envelopes by 27 of the 34 eligible couples, for a return rate of 79%.

All respondents were white. Mean ages for mothers and stepfathers were 34.74 and 36.88, respectively. On the average, both spouses had some college. Eighty-four percent of the mothers and 96% of the fathers were working. On the average, mothers earned between \$15,000 to \$19,999, while stepfathers earned between \$25,000 and \$29,999. Spouses had lived together a mean of 42.85 months and had been married a mean of 37.44 months.

Twenty-one of the couples were stepfather only families, 5 were couples in which mothers' children resided with a child born to the couple, and I included both a stepmother and a stepfather.[1] There was a total of 42 stepchildren (22 boys, 20 girls), with a mean age of 12.11 years. All stepchildren lived with their mother and stepfather on a full-time basis. With regard to marital history, 8 stepfathers were married for the first time, 14 had been divorced once, and 5 were divorced more than once. Twenty-one mothers were divorced once, and 6 were divorced more than once.

### Background Information

Respondents provided information regarding age; race; highest level of formal education (1 = less than 7th grade, 8 = doctoral degree); whether or not they were currently working; total annual income before taxes (1 = less than \$5,000, 12 = \$50,000 or more); age and gender of each child living in the household on a full-time basis; and whether the respondent was a biological parent or stepparent to each child.

### Cognitive Correlates

Ambiguity of stepfather role. Mothers indicated on a 7-point scale how much they disagreed or agreed with each of 10 items regarding the ambiguity of the stepfather role (e.g., "I have a clear idea of what it means for my husband to be a good stepfather"). Stepfathers answered the same items but in reference to themselves (e.g., "I have a clear idea of what it means to be a good stepfather"). High scores reflected high ambiguity. Cronbach's alpha for the summed composite score was .85 for mothers and .82 for stepfathers.

Optimism regarding stepfamilies. Mothers and stepfathers used a 7-point scale to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with six items reflecting a general positive outlook on life in a stepfamily (e.g., "Being part of a stepfamily poses many exciting challenges"). Cronbach's alpha for the summed composite score was .76 for mothers and .72 for stepfathers.

Myths about stepfamilies. Mothers and stepfathers used a 7-point scale to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with seven myths regarding life in stepfamilies (e.g., "A stepfamily can never be as good as a family in which children live with both natural parents"). Cronbach's alpha for the summed composite score was .76 for mothers and .77 for stepfathers.

Pearson correlations indicated that the cognition scores were not highly interrelated. For mothers, the absolute value of the correlation coefficients ranged from .01 to .77, with a mean coefficient (via Fisher's  $r$  to  $z$  transformations) of .42. For stepfathers, the absolute value of coefficients ranged from .15 to .60, with a mean coefficient (via Fisher's  $r$  to  $z$  transformation) of .40.

#### Satisfaction Variables

(Step)parenting. Mothers used a 7-point scale to rate their responses to each of three statements regarding parenting (e.g., "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your role as mother?"). Stepfathers rated the same items, but with reference to stepparenting. High scores reflected positive feelings about (step)parenting. Cronbach's alpha for the summed composite score was .78 for mothers and .87 for stepfathers.

(Step)parent-child relationships. Mothers used a 7-point scale to rate their responses to each of three statements regarding their relationships with their children (e.g., "Generally, how satisfied are you with your relationship with your children?"). Stepfathers rated the same items, but with reference to their stepchildren. High scores reflected positive feelings about (step)parent-child relationships. Cronbach's alpha for the summed composite score was .82 for mothers and .94 for stepfathers.

Satisfaction with family. Mothers and stepfathers used a 7-point scale to indicate how dissatisfied or satisfied they were with their family (the single item was, "Overall, how satisfied are you with the way things are going in your family?").

Marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction was assessed by the three-item Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm, Paff-Bergen, Hatch, Obiorah, Copeland, Meens, and Bugaighis,

1986). This scale asks respondents to rate how satisfied (1 = extremely dissatisfied, 7 = extremely satisfied) they are with their marriage' their husband/wife as a spouse, and their relationship with their husband/wife. Cronbach's alpha for the summed composite score was .96 for mothers and .97 for stepfathers.

Personal life satisfaction. Personal life satisfaction was measured by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin's (1985) 5-item Life Satisfaction Scale (e.g., "In most ways, my life is close to ideal"). Each item was rated on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha for the summed composite score was .71 for mothers and .82 for stepfathers.

In order to reduce the number of satisfaction scores, principal-components analyses were run separately on mothers' and stepfathers' five scores. Each analysis yielded two eigenvalues greater than 1.00 that together accounted for 79% and 85% of the total variance, respectively. Varimax rotations yielded a similar pattern of factor loadings for mothers and stepfathers. The first factor was defined by the two parenting scores and the second factor was defined by the family, marital, and personal life scores. For stepfathers, the family score loaded moderately high on both factors. Satisfaction with parenting and satisfaction with family/marital/personal life composite scores were derived by summing the standardized scores defining each factor. Respective Cronbach's alphas were .81 and .71 for mothers and .86 and .72 for stepfathers. The Pearson's  $r$  between the two composite satisfaction scores was .08,  $p > .05$ , for mothers and .50,  $p < .05$ , for stepfathers.

## RESULTS

### Differences between Mothers and Stepfathers

Differences between mothers and stepfathers on the three cognition and two satisfaction scores were examined by submitting each set of scores to a one-way (spouse) repeated-measures MANOVA. The obtained effect was significant for both the cognition scores,  $F(3,24) = 4.80$ ,  $p = .009$ , and the satisfaction scores,  $F(2,25) = 3.68$ ,  $p = .04$ . Means for mothers and stepfathers are presented for each score in Table I along with associated univariate  $F$  ratios. As can be seen from this table, compared to stepfathers, mothers were more optimistic about life in a stepfamily and were more satisfied with parenting than were stepfathers. They were also less likely than stepfathers to endorse myths about stepfamilies.

### Relation between Cognitions and Satisfaction

Correlations between the three cognition scores and the two satisfaction scores are presented for mothers in the top of Table 2 and for stepfathers in the bottom of Table 2. Because length of time living together could affect the nature of both cognition and adjustment (Bray et al., 1987), and because couples differed on this variable, its effects were partialled out.

The most striking pattern in this table is that cognitions were related to satisfaction in the expected direction in different areas for mothers and stepfathers. For mothers, low role ambiguity, high optimism, and few myths were related to high satisfaction in the family/marital/personal life area but not to satisfaction in the parenting area. Tests for differences between dependent correlations (Stieger, 1980) indicated that for mothers, the correlation between role ambiguity and family/marital/personal life satisfaction was significantly larger than that between role ambiguity and parenting satisfaction. Also, the correlation between optimism and family/ marital/ personal life satisfaction was significantly larger than that between optimism and parenting satisfaction,  $t(24) = 3.93$  and  $2.04$ , respectively,  $p < .05$ .

For stepfathers, generally, the reverse pattern occurred in that cognition scores tended to be more closely related to parenting satisfaction than to family/marital/personal life satisfaction. Tests for dependent correlations, however, indicated that only the correlation between role ambiguity and parenting satisfaction was significantly larger than that between role ambiguity and family/ marital/personal life satisfaction,  $t(24) = 2.22$ ,  $p < .05$ .

## DISCUSSION

This study assessed the relation between cognitions regarding life in stepfather families and satisfaction with life in such families. Because the sample was small and unlikely to be representative, the findings need to be interpreted cautiously. Further, the present data do not allow any statements to be made about the causal relation between cognitions and satisfaction, and the current findings may not generalize to stepmother families. Nonetheless, these findings are among the first to substantiate empirically clinical observations that cognitions are linked to satisfaction in stepfather families.

Compared to stepfathers, mothers were more optimistic regarding life in stepfather families and were more satisfied with parent-child relationships. Mothers may be more invested in their children's well-being than stepfathers not only because the children were born to them but also because women specialize more than men in the area of child care (Thompson and Walker, 1989). Having already experienced the stresses of single parenting, these mothers may especially welcome the addition of another adult to the family system who can provide emotional and financial support and help ease the task of childrearing (Furstenberg, 1987).

Of greater interest is the finding that, compared to mothers, stepfathers more strongly endorsed myths regarding stepfamily life. At least two interpretations of this finding seem plausible. First, because parenting is an area in which women have more expertise than men (Thompson and Walker, 1989), stepfathers may be more prone to endorse misperceptions regarding childrearing and family life. Second, because stepfathers are more likely than mothers to experience some difficulty in defining their family role, such difficulty may actually enhance their endorsement of those beliefs regarding problems associated with life in a stepfamily.

Future studies could help choose between these alternative interpretations by assessing stepfathers' knowledge of childrearing and family life and by designing longitudinal studies both to chart the developmental course of beliefs in myths related to stepfamilies and to link changes in such myths to observations of actual interactions within the stepfamily system.

In line with both intrapersonal (Baucom and Epstein, 1990; Cohen and Edwards, 1989; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) and interpersonal (Bradbury and Fincham, 1988) theories regarding the relation between cognition and satisfaction as well as clinical observations on stepfamily functioning (Leslie and Epstein, 1988; Visher and Visher, 1988), cognitions relevant to stepfamily living were related to satisfaction with life in such a family. However, the pattern of this relation depended on both the type of parent and the particular area of satisfaction. For mothers, low role ambiguity, high optimism, and few myths were related to high satisfaction with family/ marital/ personal life and were unrelated to satisfaction with parenting. For fathers, these cognitions were related to high satisfaction with stepparenting and, with the exception of optimism, were unrelated to satisfaction with family/ marital/ personal life. While analyses indicated that the pattern of correlates was most reliable for role ambiguity, the small sample afforded little power to detect other reliable differences.

Two interpretations of this intriguing pattern of findings are offered. First, findings involving role ambiguity may be due to the difference in the role ambiguity measure completed by mothers and stepfathers. Mothers rated the perceived ambiguity of their husbands' parenting role, while stepfathers rated the perceived ambiguity of their own parenting role. However, the potential importance of this difference is minimized by findings that family / marital / personal life satisfaction for mothers and parenting satisfaction for stepfathers were related to the same measures of optimism and myths completed by mothers and stepfathers.

Second, and of greater theoretical interest, this pattern of findings may indicate that cognitions provide order, structure, consistency, and control to "vulnerable" or personally important dimensions of satisfaction (Markus and Wurf, 1987). Because biological mothers are more likely than stepfathers to be comfortable relating to their children (Bray et al., 1987; Hetherington, 1989), marital, family, and personal life concerns may be more vulnerable or important areas than issues specific to their children. Thus, cognitions would be especially relevant to appraisals regarding marital, family, and personal life matters.

Similarly, because stepfathers are likely to experience some ambiguity and difficulty interacting with their stepchildren (Cherlin, 1978; Giles-Sims, 1987), concerns regarding the stepchildren may be more vulnerable or important areas than those regarding marital, family, and personal life concerns. Thus, cognitions would be especially relevant to appraisals regarding stepparent-child relationships.

The differential pattern of relations between cognitions and satisfaction also provides further evidence of the need to study multiple dimensions of satisfaction (cf. White and Booth, 1985). In



particular, the current findings indicate that within the stepfather family system, satisfaction with (step)parent-child relationships may be regulated by processes that differ from those regulating satisfaction with marital relationships.

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#### NOTES

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[1.] A preliminary one-way MANOVA indicated that mothers and stepfathers in the stepfather-only family did not differ significantly from those in more complex stepfamilies on the cognition and adjustment scores.

**TABLE 1. MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR COGNITIVE AND SATISFACTION VARIABLES FOR MOTHERS AND STEPFATHERS**

Variable	Mother		Stepfather		F(1, 26)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Cognitive variable					
Role ambiguity	32.44	11.37	30.77	9.55	0.56
Optimism	34.40	5.61	31.03	5.76	13.23[**]
Myths	16.33	6.56	20.37	7.81	9.2[**]
Satisfaction variable					
Parenting	0.34	0.67	-0.33	1.05	6.92[**]
Family/ marital/ personal life					
	0.05	0.79	-0.04	0.96	0.48

Note: n = 27. Satisfaction scores are Z scores.

[\*\*] p < .01.

**TABLE 2. PARTIAL CORRELATIONS BETWEEN COGNITION AND SATISFACTION SCORES FOR MOTHERS AND STEPFATHERS**

Satisfaction Score	Cognition Score		
	Role Ambiguity	Optimism	Myths
<b>Mothers</b>			
Parenting	.19	.14	-.19
Family/ marital/ personal life	-.62[**]	.60[**]	.32[*]
<b>Stepfathers</b>			
Parenting	-.61[**]	.61[**]	-.48[**]
Family/ marital / personal life	-.25	.47[**]	-.30

Note: n = 27. Months living together was used as the control variable.

[\*] p < .05. [\*\*] p < .01.

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