

## Perceived self-competence, stepfamily myths, and (step)parent role ambiguity in adolescents from stepfather and stepmother families.

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### **Abstract:**

Assessed type of stepfamily (stepfather vs stepmother) and gender differences in junior high school students' perceived self-competence, myths about stepfamilies, and perceived ambiguity of the (step)parent role. In self-competence, there were no significant effects for type of stepfamily, gender, or their interaction. Ss rating stepparents reported more role ambiguity than did those rating biological parents. Without control variables, but not with them, stepmother role ambiguity was negatively correlated with self-competence. Contrary to expectations, self-competence was positively correlated with adherence to stepfamily myths. For those in stepmother families, self-competence was positively correlated with years since parental divorce and years living with the stepparent.

**Keywords:** adolescent attitudes | parenting | stepfamilies | self-competence | stepparents

### **Article:**

Estimates indicate that 35% of children born in the early 1980s can expect to live with a stepparent before age 18 ( Glick, 1989). The adjustment of these children has been of considerable interest because they face stressful circumstances that may place them at risk for psychological difficulties. For children who enter stepfamilies following divorce, these stressors include dealing with loss and grief associated with the former family arrangement, divided loyalties between nonresidential parents and stepparents, difficulties from being members in more than one household, receiving less attention from the residential biological parent after the addition of the stepparent, and fantasies of their biological parents reuniting ( Visher & Visher, 1988).

Studies that have compared the adjustment of children in stepfamilies with those in first-marriage families have generally found that those in stepfamilies were more poorly adjusted on some dimensions (e.g., behavioral problems, social competence, substance abuse) than were those in first-marriage families ( Bray, 1988; Dawson, 1991; Dornbusch et al., 1985; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985; Needle, Su, & Doherty, 1990; Peterson & Zill, 1986; Steinberg, 1987; Zill, 1988). However, some studies have not found these family structure

differences (e.g., Kurdek & Sinclair, 1988), and some have found negative effects for girls only (e.g., Needle et al., 1990; Santrock, Warshak, Lindberg, & Meadows, 1982).

Two major problems exist with the designs of studies that simply compare children in stepfamilies with those in intact families (Ganong & Coleman, 1987). First, aggregating children into either intact families or stepfamilies obscures important differences among children within each type of family (Clingempeel, Brand, & Segal, 1987). Second, comparisons of different family structures do not address processes within families that influence the adjustment of children (Coleman & Ganong, 1990).

In contrast to previous studies, this article examines variability within the stepfamily structure by comparing the perceived self-competence of adolescents from residential stepfather and stepmother families. Furthermore, it identifies several cognitive processes that may be related to self-competence in stepfamilies. Because the primary focus of this study was on adolescents in stepfamilies, no group of first-marriage families was used for comparison purposes. This is consistent with recommendations by stepfamily scholars that researchers attend to processes within stepfamilies that may be related to adjustment (Coleman & Ganong, 1990).

Both researchers and clinicians have suggested that residential stepmothers may have more difficult and ambiguous roles than residential stepfathers because of negative stereotyping of stepmothers (Ganong, Coleman, & Mapes, 1990) and because of the lack of socially accepted norms for stepmother behavior (Fine & Schwebel, 1992; Ihinger-Tallman, 1988). Some speculated that the more difficult and ambiguous role of the stepmother relative to the stepfather may lead to greater adjustment difficulties in children from stepmother families than those from stepfather families (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989; Visher & Visher, 1988). However, although some investigators reported that stepfathers are more likely than stepmothers to have good relationships with their stepchildren, the few studies that have empirically compared children's adjustment from stepfather and stepmother families found few differences (Clingempeel & Segal, 1986; Coleman & Ganong, 1987; Ferri, 1984).

Because of the lack of information regarding type of stepfamily differences in child adjustment, the first purpose of this study was to relate the perceived self-competence of adolescents to type of stepfamily (residential stepfather vs. residential stepmother), gender, and the Type of Stepfamily  $\times$  Gender interaction. The inclusion of the stepmother group is noteworthy because most investigations of the adjustment of adolescents in stepfamilies have included only those in stepfather families (Ganong & Coleman, 1987). Because the self-competence of adolescents in stepfamilies formed after parental divorce may be different than that of those in stepfamilies formed following parental death (Clingempeel et al., 1987) and because there were few adolescents in the latter group in the present sample, only those in stepfamilies formed after a parental divorce were studied. Because of a lack of information on differences in adjustment between children and adolescents in residential stepfather and stepmother families, no prediction was made regarding type of stepfamily effects.

Particularly in stepfather families, girls have been found to experience more difficulty with stepfamily living than boys (Brand, Clingempeel, & Bowen-Woodward, 1988; Vuchinich, Hetherington, Vuchinich, & Clingempeel, 1991). Because few studies have simultaneously

included gender and type of stepfamily as independent variables, the issue of a Gender  $\times$  Type of Stepfamily interaction was explored further.

Seventh and eighth graders were selected because many of the previous studies in this area have included young adolescents and because they may have more adjustment difficulties in stepfamilies than their younger counterparts (Bray, Berger, Boethel, & Maymi, 1989; Hetherington et al., 1989). Harter's (1982) Self-Perception Profile was chosen as the outcome measure because (a) it has sound psychometric properties, (b) students' reports of self-competence may be more reliable than their reports of psychopathology, and (c) in nonclinical samples, there may be greater variability in perceptions of self-competence than in perceptions of psychopathology.

The second purpose of this study was to assess (a) whether adolescents in stepfamilies perceive more role ambiguity with respect to stepparents than to biological parents and (b) the extent to which (step)parent role ambiguity is related to perceived self-competence. Stepparent roles are likely to be ambiguous (Cherlin, 1978; Leslie & Epstein, 1988; Visher & Visher, 1988) because few socially accepted standards guide stepparenting behavior. Ambiguity surrounding the role of the stepparent has been identified as one of the major difficulties encountered by members of stepfamilies (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989; Fine & Schwebel, 1992). However, empirical support for this claim is scant and is limited to the perceptions of parents and stepparents (Kurdek & Fine, 1991).

In this study, ambiguity regarding parent or stepparent roles was operationally defined as adolescents' uncertainty regarding how parents or stepparents fulfill their roles (cf. King & King, 1990). It was hypothesized that adolescents in stepfather families would report more ambiguity regarding the stepfather role than would those in stepmother families regarding the father role. Similarly, it was predicted that adolescents in stepmother families would report more ambiguity regarding the stepmother role than would those in stepfather families regarding the mother role. Because of a lack of previous findings on how perceptions of roles might differ by gender or by an interaction between stepfamily type and gender, these effects were explored. In addition, given claims made in the clinical literature that (step)parent role ambiguity is related to the adjustment of stepfamily members (Visher & Visher, 1988), it was hypothesized that (step)parent role ambiguity would be negatively related to perceived self-competence.

The third purpose of this study was to examine whether adolescents in stepfather and stepmother families differ in the degree to which they endorse stepfamily "myths" and whether endorsement of these myths is related to perceived self-competence. Myths related to stepfamily living are of interest in light of empirical findings and clinical observations that children's dysfunctional beliefs are negatively related to their adjustment (Roehling & Robin, 1986; Visher & Visher, 1988). Visher and Visher (1988) identified common myths held by members of stepfamilies, including the beliefs that stepfamilies are functionally equivalent to intact families, that stepfamily members should immediately love one another, and that stepfamily adjustment should be attained quickly. Because endorsement of these myths may lead to unrealistic expectations, which, when not met, may lead to stress, frustration, and adjustment difficulties (Fine & Schwebel, 1992), it was hypothesized that endorsement of stepfamily myths would be negatively related to perceived self-competence. Given the lack of previous research, no hypotheses were

posited with respect to how the extent of belief in stepfamily myths might differ by stepfamily type, gender, and the interaction between stepfamily type and gender.

The adjustment of adolescents in stepfamilies has been related to a number of demographic variables, including the length of time since the biological parents divorced, the length of time in the stepfamily, socioeconomic status, the number of family members in the household, and the age of the child (Clingempeel et al., 1987). The final purpose of this study was to relate perceived self-competence to these demographic variables. Because the nature of the relations may differ depending on the type of stepfamily (Clingempeel et al., 1987), analyses were conducted separately for adolescents in stepfather and stepmother families.

Because the adjustment of stepfamily members is thought to be a process that occurs slowly over time (Visher & Visher, 1988), it was hypothesized that there would be a positive relation between perceived self-competence and both the length of time since the biological parents divorced and the length of time the adolescents lived in their stepfamilies. Consistent with the findings of Harter (1985), self-competence was also expected to be negatively related to age.

## Method

### Subjects

All students in a midwestern public junior high school were given consent forms to take home to their parents, and approximately 76% received parental consent to participate anonymously. Of the 500 students for whom complete data were gathered, only those presently living in stepfamilies following parental divorce were included in the study. Questionnaires from 23 students meeting these criteria were not included because of missing data.

Subjects with complete data were 46 seventh graders (28 girls and 18 boys) and 35 eighth graders (17 girls and 18 boys). Subjects' mean age was 12.65 years (range = 11–14 years) and almost all (94%) were White. On the basis of students' reports, parents had been divorced a mean of 7.78 years, their residential biological parents had been remarried a mean of 4.78 years, and they had lived with their stepparents for a mean of 4.81 years. Sixty-four students (38 girls and 26 boys) resided with a stepfather family, and 17 (7 girls and 10 boys) resided with a stepmother family.

The comparability of the stepfather and stepmother groups on demographic variables was tested with a one-way (stepfamily type) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) on the following variables: age, grade, parental education, number of siblings, race, gender, length of parental divorce, number of years subjects' residential biological parents had been remarried, and number of years subjects lived with their stepparents. Relevant means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1. Because the multivariate effect—here and elsewhere based on Wilks's lambda—was not significant,  $F(9, 53) = 1.43, p > .05$ , no control variables were used in the type of stepfamily comparisons presented in the Results section.

**Table 1 has been omitted from this formatted document.**

### Procedure

A 16-page questionnaire containing the instruments described next was administered to students by teachers in two consecutive health classes. Students were told that the investigation was designed to study children from different types of families. Furthermore, they were assured that

their participation was voluntary, that they could discontinue participation at any time, that their responses were anonymous, and that teachers would not have access to their responses.

## Instruments

### Background variables

Subjects reported information regarding age, grade, gender, race, family structure, each parent's or stepparent's highest level of education (1 = less than 9 years of school; 7 = graduate degree), each parent's or stepparent's occupation, and the number of siblings. Students also reported length of divorce, how long they lived with their stepparent, and the length of their residential biological parents' remarriage. Family structure was identified by having students select one statement that best described their current living arrangement. In this study, those in stepfather families selected the statement "My parents are divorced and my mother has remarried; I live with my natural mother and stepfather," and those in stepmother families selected "My parents are divorced and my father has remarried; I live with my natural father and stepmother."

Our previous experience with questionnaires for this age group revealed that students are more able to reliably report parental education than family income and parental occupation. Thus, an index of socioeconomic status was constructed on the basis of parents' education scores. Because the educational levels of those parents living in the household were considered of prime importance, parental education was computed as the mean educational level of mothers and stepfathers in stepfather families and fathers and stepmothers in stepmother families.

### Perceived self-competence

Perceived self-competence was measured by Harter's (1985) Self-Perception Profile for Children. Each of the 36 items contains both a positive pole (e.g., "Some kids feel that they are very good at their schoolwork") and a negative pole (e.g., "Other kids worry about whether they can do the schoolwork assigned to them"). Each statement required two decisions. First, subjects decided whether the positive or negative pole better described them. Next, they decided whether the description for that pole was "sort of true" or "really true" for them. The profile has excellent psychometric properties, as described in Harter (1982).

Although the instrument has six subscales (Scholastic Competence, Social Acceptance, Athletic Competence, Physical Appearance, Behavioral Conduct, and Global Self-Worth), only the summed composite score was used because of its high internal consistency in the present sample (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ). The total possible score was 144; higher scores indicate greater perceived self-competence.

### Ambiguity of (step)father and (step)mother role

Subjects indicated how much they disagreed or agreed (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) with each of three items regarding the ambiguity of the (step)father role and three items regarding the (step)mother role. On the father scale, items were "It was difficult for me to decide what I'd like to call my (step)father," "I am hardly ever sure what to expect from my (step)father," and "I have hardly any examples in real life to show me what a good (step)father is like." The (step)mother items were identical with the exception that "(step)mother" was substituted for "(step)father."

Subjects in stepmother families answered the items about their biological fathers and stepmothers, whereas those in stepfather families responded about their mothers and stepfathers. Cronbach's alphas for the summed composite scores were .75, .47, .71, and .83 for the father, stepfather, mother, and stepmother ratings, respectively. Given the few items in this scale, the lack of alternative measures, the high values for ratings of fathers, mothers, and stepmothers, and the desirability of having the same scale used for all four parents, the relatively low value for stepfathers was considered acceptable for this preliminary stage of research in this area.

#### Myths about stepfamilies

Subjects rated how much they agreed (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) with seven myths regarding life in stepfamilies (e.g., "A stepfamily should work the same way as any other kind of family," "Children should love their stepparents as much as they love their natural parents"). Items were similar to those developed by Kurdek and Fine (1991) in their study of mothers and stepfathers in stepfather families. Cronbach's alpha for the summed composite score was .65.

#### Results

##### Stepfamily Type and Gender Differences in Perceived Self-Competence

To assess stepfamily type and gender differences in perceived self-competence, a 2 (type of stepfamily)  $\times$  2 (gender) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was computed with perceived self-competence as the dependent variable. Means and standard deviations by stepfamily type are presented in Table 1. There were no significant effects for stepfamily type, gender, or their interaction. (Note that identical results were obtained in separate analyses on each of the six subscales of the Self-Perception Profile.)

##### Stepfamily Type and Gender Differences in Role Ambiguity and Stepfamily Myths

To assess stepfamily type and gender differences in (step)parent role ambiguity and stepfamily myths, a 2 (stepfamily type)  $\times$  2 (gender) MANOVA was computed with (step)father role ambiguity, (step)mother role ambiguity, and myths as dependent variables. The effect for stepfamily type was significant,  $F(3, 75) = 5.31$   $p < .01$ . Multivariate effects for gender and the Stepfamily Type  $\times$  Gender interaction were not significant.

Subsequent univariate ANOVAs revealed significant type of stepfamily effects on (step)father role ambiguity,  $F(1, 77) = 4.07$ ,  $p < .05$ , and (step)mother role ambiguity,  $F(1, 77) = 5.31$ ,  $p < .05$ . Means and standard deviations are presented by stepfamily type in Table 1. These results indicate that subjects rating stepfathers (those in stepfather families) reported more role ambiguity than did those rating biological fathers (those in stepmother families). Furthermore, subjects rating stepmothers (those in stepmother families) reported more role ambiguity than did those rating biological mothers (those in stepfather families).

##### Relations Between Perceived Self-Competence and Demographic Variables, Role Ambiguity, and Stepfamily Myths

For each stepfamily group, Pearson correlations were computed between each demographic variable and perceived self-competence. As shown in Table 2, age was significantly negatively correlated with perceived self-competence in both stepfamily groups. In addition, in the

stepmother group, perceived self-competence was significantly positively correlated with years since parental divorce, years lived with the stepparent, and years since the residential biological parent remarried. Furthermore, the correlations between self-competence and years since parental divorce ( $z = 1.91, p < .05$ ), years lived with the stepparent ( $z = 3.32, p < .01$ ), and years since remarriage ( $z = 2.89, p < .01$ ) were significantly higher in stepmother families than in stepfather families.

**Table 2 has been omitted from this formatted document.**

To determine the relations between perceived self-competence and role ambiguity and stepfamily myths, zero-order and partial correlations were computed separately for each stepfamily group. For the partial correlations, control variables were chosen that were significantly correlated with self-competence. For the stepfather group, age of subject was the control variable, whereas in the stepmother group age of subject, years since divorce, and years lived with the stepparent were control variables. Years since the residential biological parent remarried was not used as a control variable because it was highly correlated with time since divorce and years lived with stepparent.

The zero-order and partial correlations are presented in Table 2. The zero-order correlation coefficients revealed that myths was significantly positively correlated ( $p < .05$ ) with perceived self-competence for students in stepfather families. In addition, for those in stepmother families, the extent of stepmother role ambiguity was marginally significantly ( $p < .10$ ) related to self-competence. Although this coefficient did not satisfy the traditional ( $p < .05$ ) criteria for statistical significance, the exploratory nature of this work and the small sample size in the stepmother group warrant its presentation. However, because the correlation was only marginally statistically significant and was not significantly higher than the comparable one in stepfather families, this finding needs to be interpreted with caution until future studies determine if it is reliable.

After removing variance in self-competence accounted for by the control variables, myths was significantly positively correlated with perceived self-competence for both stepfamily groups. The partial correlations between perceived self-competence and the role ambiguity scores were not significant.

## Discussion

The results indicated that perceived self-competence did not vary by type of stepfamily, gender, or the interaction between type of stepfamily and gender. These nonsignificant type of stepfamily effects support previous research (Clingempeel & Segal, 1986; Ferri, 1984) that found that the effects of stepfamily living on adolescents' perceived self-competence are similar in residential stepfather and stepmother families. Despite their small numbers, the inclusion of the stepmother group is noteworthy because few studies have had sufficient numbers of subjects from stepmother families to compare with subjects from stepfather families. However, the small number of students in stepmother families afforded low statistical power.

The lack of gender differences in self-competence is inconsistent with the general finding that girls adjust less positively to stepfamily life than boys (Brand et al., 1988; Hetherington et al.,

1989). It is possible that there may have been gender differences had alternative methods of assessment been used (e.g., behavioral observation, parent or teacher ratings, and self-reports of internalizing and externalizing behavior problems).

One of the major findings of this study was that, as hypothesized, subjects rating their stepfathers reported more role ambiguity than did those rating their biological fathers (those in stepmother families). Furthermore, students in stepmother families reported more ambiguity about their stepmothers' role than did subjects in stepfather families about their mothers' role. Because the role ambiguity scales lack previous validation, it is premature to conclude that adolescents living in stepfamilies experience ambiguity about how their stepparents should behave. Nevertheless, the results (in both stepfather and stepmother families) are consistent with such claims (Cherlin, 1978; Leslie & Epstein, 1988; Visher & Visher, 1988).

As hypothesized, in analyses conducted without control variables, the extent of stepmother role ambiguity was marginally negatively related to perceived self-competence, which is consistent with previous reports (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989; Fine & Schwebel, 1992). However, the degree of stepfather role ambiguity was not related to self-competence. Furthermore, in analyses conducted with control variables, neither stepfather nor stepmother role ambiguity was related to perceived self-competence. It should be noted again, however, that these analyses suffered from low statistical power because of small sample sizes.

It is also possible that the effects of (step)parent role ambiguity might be more strongly related to adolescents' ratings of parenting efficacy or satisfaction with family life rather than self-competence. Indeed, Kurdek and Fine (1991), using a very similar stepfather role ambiguity scale, found that greater ambiguity regarding the stepfather role was related to poorer perceived parental adjustment for both mothers and stepfathers.

An unexpected finding was that the extent of belief in stepfamily myths was positively related to perceived self-competence. It was expected that an inverse relation would be found, because stepfamily myths were thought to reflect unrealistic expectations that would lead to frustration and possibly adjustment difficulties. Two explanations for this finding are offered. First, the positive relation between stepfamily myths and self-competence found for both stepfamily groups may indicate that both are related to either an underlying optimism regarding family life or an underlying denial of existing problems. Second, it is also possible that the young adolescents who believed more in these myths did so not because of optimism or denial of problems but because, in their families, such beliefs were not myths but reflected their actual experiences. These positive experiences, in turn, may have been related to perceptions of self-competence.

In contrast to the present finding, Kurdek and Fine (1991) reported that the endorsement of stepfamily myths by parents and stepparents in stepfather families was negatively related to ratings of satisfaction with (step)parenting and family life. However, they did not assess (step)parents' self-competence. Future studies could examine how endorsement of stepfamily myths is related to both the family and self systems in parents, stepparents, and children.



With respect to the relations between self-competence and the demographic variables, the clearest pattern was that perceived self-competence was significantly positively correlated with years since parental divorce, years lived with stepparent, and years since the residential biological parent remarried for adolescents in stepmother families but not for those in stepfather families. Furthermore, again only in stepmother families, in analyses not reported in this article, significant negative correlations were found between stepmother role ambiguity and time since divorce and years lived with stepparent, indicating that the longer students lived with their stepmothers, the less stepmother role ambiguity they experienced. For those in stepmother families, this is consistent with literature that suggested that adjustment and the development of clear roles in stepfamilies is a process that improves over time ( Visher & Visher, 1988). However, it is not clear why these relations were not found for those in stepfather families. Perhaps the more difficult roles and relations found in stepmother families require more time to be negotiated and resolved than do those in stepfather families ( Fine & Schwebel, 1992; Ihinger-Tallman, 1988). Future studies should attempt to replicate these intriguing findings.

The major limitations of this study are the relatively small number of adolescents in stepmother families, the exclusive reliance on self-report measures, and the inability to infer the causal direction of the obtained relations. In addition, a number of potentially influential variables were not assessed, including whether or not the stepparent had children of his or her own from a previous marriage (living in either the stepparent's or in the ex-spouse's home), whether or not the remarried couple had children of their own, and the students' custody arrangement (traditional, shared, or joint custody). In larger samples, it may be possible to test whether the relations explored in this study are affected by these variables.

Future research should continue to develop reliable and valid measures of (step)parental role ambiguity and stepfamily myths that use both parents and children as sources of information. As the measurement of these constructs is refined, and with larger sample sizes, more powerful tests of the hypothesis that (step)parent role ambiguity and stepfamily myths are related to adolescent adjustment can be conducted. Furthermore, to attempt to delineate the causal relation between these cognitive processes and self-competence, studies that assess role perceptions and beliefs early in the formation of the stepfamily and that track adjustment longitudinally over an extended time period may be particularly useful.

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