

The adjustment of adolescents in stepfather and stepmother families.

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Abstract:

The article presents a study that assessed the relations between adolescent adjustment in stepfamilies, and both family context and process variables. The process variables assessed were those commonly identified as being related to child and adolescent outcomes. Because adolescent adjustment is likely to be multiply-determined, three layers of processes were considered: intrapersonal i.e., self-mastery; parent-child inter-personal--authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and adjunctive--and; family system interpersonal--supervision, warmth, conflict, interest, and order. Subjects for the study were drawn from a pool of 1,028 sixth and seventh grade students from a junior high school that served a midwestern city of approximately 39,000 people. Participants were 118--60 boys, 58 girls--sixth and seventh grade students living with stepfathers and 32--15 boys, 17 girls--living with stepmothers. Results indicated that students living with stepfathers had higher self-esteem and fewer reported social problems than those living with stepmothers.

Keywords: psychology | adolescent psychology | stepfamilies | parenting | family studies

Article:

This study assessed the relations between adolescent adjustment in stepfamilies and both family context and process variables. Participants were 118 (60 boys, 58 girls) sixth and seventh grade students living with stepfathers and 32 (15 boys, 17 girls) living with stepmothers. Self-report measures of adjustment, self-mastery, parenting, and family process variables were administered, and some parents completed a measure of their adolescents' social problems. Results indicated that students living with stepfathers had higher self-esteem and fewer reported social problems than those living with stepmothers. Girls had higher grades and more health problems than boys. The complexity of the stepfamily ("simple" vs. "complex") was not related to adjustment. Self-mastery and family process variables were strongly related to adjustment, particularly among

girls living with stepmothers. The results suggest that processes are more strongly related to adolescent adjustment in stepfamilies than are contextual variables.

A sizable minority of children (35%) born in the early 1980s can expect to live with a stepparent--particularly a stepfather--before the age of 18 (Glick, 1989). Although studies have found that children/adolescents in stepfather families are more poorly adjusted than those in first-marriage families (Bray, 1988; Dawson, 1991; Dornbusch et al., 1985; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985; Peterson & Zill, 1986; Steinberg, 1987; Zill, 1988), the family structure differences are generally small, are not always found (e.g., Kurdek & Sinclair, 1988), are sometimes present for girls only (e.g., Santrock, Warshak, Lindberg, & Meadows, 1982), and vary by source of information (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992).

Studies comparing the adjustment of children/ adolescents in stepfamilies with those in first-marriage families are limited in two ways. First, such studies have not elucidated potentially important differences between types of stepfamilies (Clingempeel, Brand, & Segal, 1987). Second, these studies have not addressed the processes within stepfamilies that influence children's/adolescents' adjustment (Coleman & Ganong, 1990).

This paper addresses these limitations within a person-process-context model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983). With reference to this study, this model posits that the adjustment of adolescents with different personal characteristics (e.g., male vs. female) may be differentially affected by processes (intrapsychic, parenting, and family) in different family contexts (stepfamily structures). Gender of adolescent was selected as the personal variable in the model because it has been linked with adjustment to divorce and stepfamily life (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992).

The process variables assessed were those commonly identified in the literature as being related to child and adolescent outcomes. Because adolescent adjustment is likely to be multiply-determined, three layers of processes were considered: intrapersonal (self-mastery), parent-child interpersonal (authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and adjunctive), and family system interpersonal (supervision, warmth, conflict, interest, and order).

The context component of the model was represented by the type of stepfamily. Four step-family types were formed by crossing stepfather and stepmother families with "complex" (both spouses are living with children from each of their previous marriages) and "simple" (only one spouse lives with children of the other spouse) stepfamilies. Family context was limited to step-families because stepfamily scholars have suggested that future research address processes within stepfamilies that facilitate adjustment and make comparisons among types of stepfamilies (Clingempeel et al., 1987; Coleman & Ganong, 1990).

Adolescents were studied because they may have more difficulties in stepfamilies than younger children (Hetherington, Stanley Hagan, & Anderson, 1989). Because adolescent adjustment in

stepfamilies formed following divorce may be different than that in stepfamilies formed following the death of a parent (Clingempeel et al., 1987), only those in stepfamilies formed after a parental divorce were included. Further, as young adolescents' adjustment is multidimensional (Gillmore et al., 1991), positive adjustment was operationalized as high grades, good health, low drug usage, high self-esteem, and few social problems.

The first objective of this study was to explore the impact of personal and contextual variables on adolescent adjustment by relating adolescents' adjustment to stepfamily type and gender of adolescent. Residential stepmothers may have particularly difficult roles because their involvement in childcare is likely to meet with resistance from adolescents (Ihinger-Tallman, 1988). Further, because the custody of children following divorce is awarded to fathers only in cases of very close father-child and/or conflictual mother-child relationships, the children who are in their fathers' custody may have particular difficulty adapting to the addition of stepmothers into their lives (Clingempeel et al., 1987). As a result, adolescents living with stepmothers may have more adjustment difficulties than those living with stepfathers (Hetherington et al., 1989; Visher & Visher, 1988). However, because the few studies that have empirically compared the adjustment of adolescents from stepfather and stepmother families have found few differences (Coleman & Ganong, 1990; Fine, Kurdek, & Hennigen, 1992), no hypothesis was posed with respect to gender of stepparent effects.

Roles and relationships in complex stepfamilies may be more confusing than those in simple stepfamilies because few institutional guidelines exist to regulate these roles and relationships (Visher & Visher, 1988). This greater confusion and difficulty may lead to family conflict which, in turn, may result in poorer adjustment for children in complex stepfamilies relative to those in simple stepfamilies. Because of the difficulty of the issues likely to be confronted in complex step-families (Clingempeel, Ievoli, & Brand, 1984; White, Brinkerhoff, & Booth, 1985), adolescents living in complex stepfamilies were expected to be more poorly adjusted than those in simple step-families.

Adolescent gender was selected as a personal variable because some investigations have found that, particularly in stepfather families, girls experience more difficulty with stepfamily living than boys (Amato & Keith, 1991; Aquilino, 1991; Bray, 1988; Hetherington et al., 1985; Vuchinich, Hetherington, Vuchinich, & Clingempeel, 1991). However, because some studies have found no gender differences (Clingempeel & Segal, 1986; Fine et al., 1992; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992), no hypothesis was posed with respect to gender of adolescent effects.

To examine the impact of processes on adolescent adjustment, the second objective of this study was to relate adolescent adjustment to intrapersonal, parent-child interpersonal, and family system interpersonal processes. Self-mastery was selected as an intrapersonal process in light of evidence that adolescents who believe they have control over their environment may be protected against the negative effects of stressful experiences (Garmezy, 1987; Luthar, 1991). Feelings of control may be problematic for adolescents living in stepfamilies, because they are

likely to have experienced changes that were outside their control (e.g., divorce of their parents, addition of a new adult into the family). It was expected that self-mastery would be positively related to adjustment.

Parent-child interpersonal processes were represented by authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and adjunctive parenting. The first three parenting dimensions were selected because they have been consistently identified as being related to child outcomes (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Because previous studies have found that adolescents' social competence and academic success were positively related to authoritative parenting and negatively related to authoritarian and permissive parenting (Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989), similar findings were expected here.

Adjunctive parenting, which refers to behaviors that support the parent who has assumed primary responsibility for childrearing activities, is particularly relevant to the stepfamily context. Bray (1988) and Hetherington et al. (1985) have found that stepfathers who initially did not take responsibility for discipline, but rather took a secondary, monitoring role, had more positive relationships with their stepchildren than did those who immediately functioned as active disciplinarians. Further, biological parents who assume the active role of the primary disciplinarian and do not serve as the adjunctive parent may foster positive adjustment in their children. As a result, it was expected that adolescent adjustment would be positively related to adjunctive parenting by the stepparent and negatively related to adjunctive parenting by the biological parent.

Finally, family system interpersonal processes were tapped by supervision, warmth, conflict, interest, and order. These variables have been frequently identified as influential processes affecting adolescent development (Amato, 1990). Based on previous evidence, adjustment was expected to be positively related to supervision (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Crouter, MacDermid, Mc-Hale, & Perry-Jenkins, 1990); negatively related to conflict (Kurdek & Sinclair, 1988); positively related to warmth and interest (Maccoby & Martin, 1983); and positively related to order (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982). It is important to note that adolescents rated their perceptions of their "family" and not their perceptions of their parents or stepparents.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were drawn from a pool of 1,028 sixth and seventh grade students from a junior high school that served a midwestern city of approximately 39,000 people. According to city records, the median annual household income for 1989 was \$37,408. For the following reasons, 878 participants were not included in this sample: 711 did not live in stepfamilies formed following divorce; 84 had missing data; 69 provided inconsistent data (e.g., they indicated that they lived with a stepmother, but did not list a stepmother as someone with whom they lived); 11 had

parents who did not want their child to participate; and 3 had parent letters that were not deliverable (see below).

Participants were 118 students (60 boys, 58 girls) who lived with stepfathers and 32 (15 boys, 17 girls) who lived with stepmothers. Of these, 124 (61 boys, 63 girls) lived in simple stepfamilies (only one spouse had children from a previous marriage living full-time in the stepfamily) and 26 (14 boys, 12 girls) lived in complex stepfamilies (both spouses had children from a previous marriage living full-time in the stepfamily). Participants' mean age was 12.50 years, almost all were white (91%), and the modal interval length since parental divorce was 3 to 6 years. Most subjects (91%) had experienced only one divorce. The mean family size [excluding (step)parents] was 2.39. The demographic comparability of subjects living with stepfathers and stepmothers is addressed below.

A small number of respondents (26%) indicated that another family member concurrently attended the same school. However, because students participated anonymously, it was not possible to determine how many of these participants had related (either siblings or stepsiblings) family members who were also in the same subsample analyzed in this study. To explore the possible effects of this variable, analyses were conducted with and without sibling enrollment (yes vs. no) as a covariate. Because the results were identical, the analyses presented below were conducted without this covariate. Given evidence that siblings differentially experience the same family environment (Hoffman, 1991), given that few subjects were involved, and given findings from covariate analyses, concerns regarding the independence of observations were allayed.

Parent ratings (see below) were returned for 70 of the 150 students in the present sample (47%). Four one-way (parent data vs. no parent data) MANOVAs on the demographic, adjustment, parenting, and family process sets of variables yielded nonsignificant effects. Thus, students whose parents completed questionnaires were not significantly different from those whose parents did not.

In 57 of the 70 cases (81%), the biological parent completed the form. To test for possible confounds, a 2 (rater: biological vs. stepparent informant) x 2 (gender of stepparent) x 2 (gender of respondent) ANOVA was computed on social problems. Only the effect for rater was significant, $F(1,58) = 4.44$, $p < .05$, and indicated that biological parents rated their children as having fewer social problems than did stepparents. Because findings from analyses involving social problems conducted with rater used as a covariate differed from those conducted without rater as a covariate, the analyses on social problems reported below included rater as a covariate.

Measures

Background information. Students provided information regarding age, grade, gender, race, parental education, time since divorce (1 = within the past year, 2 = about 2-3 years ago, 3 = about 3-6 years ago, 4 = more than 7 years ago), frequency of visitation by the nonresidential parent (1 = never, 2 = a few times a year, 3 = about every month or so, 4 = about every week or

so, 5 = every day), and whether any children were born to the parent and stepparent (0 = no, 1 = yes).

For parental education, students circled the highest level of schooling (1 = 8 or fewer years of school, 2 = some high school, 3 = high school graduate, 4 = some college, 5 = college graduate, 6 = degree after college) completed by the parent and stepparent currently living with the student. A composite parent education score was derived by averaging the scores for parents and step-parents.

Family structure. Family structure was assessed by having the student select which one of 13 descriptions best fits his or her current living situation. For this sample, the relevant statements were "My parents are divorced and my mother has remarried. I live with my natural father and my stepmother." This procedure did not allow for a determination if the child resided in a joint, rather than sole, custody arrangement.

Adjustment. Five adjustment measures were used: four self-report and one parent-report. Their internal consistencies ranged from moderately high to high.

Grades were reported for the last marking period in English, math, social studies, science, and reading. Letter grades were recoded as numeric scores, 0 = F, 4 = A, summed, and divided by 5. Cronbach's alpha (for the current sample here and below) was .81.

Health problems were assessed by asking students to indicate how frequently (1 = never, 4 = fairly often) they had an upset stomach, headaches, nightmares or bad dreams, a sore throat, a cough or a cold, trouble going to sleep, skin problems, or felt tired all day. Items were taken from the Health and Daily Living Youth Form (Moos, Cronkite, Billings, & Finney, 1982). High scores indicate the presence of many health problems. Cronbach's alpha for the summed composite score was .70.

Drug usage was measured by items that asked students to indicate how often (1 = never, 4 = fairly often) in the last month they had smoked cigarettes, drunk wine, drunk beer, drunk liquor, or smoked marijuana. Items were taken from the Health and Daily Living Form (Moos et al., 1982). High scores indicate high drug usage. Cronbach's alpha for the summed composite score was .70.

Self-esteem was assessed by the 10-item Rosenberg (1979) Self-Esteem Inventory. Students indicated how much they agreed (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree), with each item (e.g., "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself."). Cronbach's alpha for the summed composite score was .85.

Parents rated their child's social problems by answering 30 true-false items from the Social Skills scale of the Personality Inventory for Children (Lachar & Gdowski, 1979). Sample items included "Other children look up to my child as a leader." and "My child has many friends."

High scores indicate the presence of many social problems. Cronbach's alpha for the summed composite score was .86.

Processes. Three sets of process variables were assessed--intrapersonal, parent-child interpersonal, and family system interpersonal. The internal consistencies of the measures ranged from moderate to moderately high. Self-mastery was the intrapersonal process of interest and was assessed by Pearlin and Schooler's (1978) Self-Mastery scale. For each of seven items (e.g., "What happens to me in the future mostly depends on me."), participants indicated how strongly they agreed with each statement (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha for the summed composite score was .67.

Parent variables. Authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting were measured by items adapted from Buff, Louiselie, Misukanis, and Meuller (1988). A sample item from the five-item authoritative scale was "My mother usually gives me a reason why family rules are made." A sample item from the five-item authoritarian scale was "If I don't agree with my father, he usually forces me to do what he thinks is right." A sample item from the 4-item permissive scale was "My stepmother lets me do just about anything I want." An adjunctive parenting scale was developed for the present study. A sample item from this four-item scale was "My father makes the rules, and my stepmother carries them out."

Students living with stepfathers completed these items separately for their mothers and stepfathers, whereas those living with stepmothers completed them separately for their fathers and stepmothers. Cronbach's alphas for the authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and adjunctive scales were .70, .42, .67, and .68, respectively, for mothers; .78, .77, .69, and .55 for stepfathers; .77, .72, .72, and .58 for fathers; and .79, .76, .66, and .61 for stepmothers.

Family process variables. Warmth was tapped by five statements (e.g., "There's a feeling of togetherness in my family."), supervision was assessed by four items (e.g., "Someone in my family makes sure that my homework is done."), conflict was measured by five items (e.g., "There's a lot of yelling and fighting in my family."), order was tapped by five items ("There are set ways of doing things in my home."), and interest was assessed by four items (e.g., "Someone in my family takes an interest in the things I do."). Cronbach's alphas were .84, .59, .75, .53, and .73 for the warmth, supervision, conflict, order, and interest scales, respectively.

Procedure

Letters were sent to parents of all sixth and seventh grade students in May 1991. Because the assessment instrument was not considered to pose any psychological risk, and because parents of "at risk" children frequently do not return consent forms (Weinberger, Tublin, Ford, & Feldman, 1990), a "passive" consent procedure was used with parents and an "active" consent procedure was used with students. Parents were instructed that if they did not return a signed form that indicated that they did not want their child to participate in the study, it would be assumed that they had provided consent.

The adolescents whose parents did not object to their participation anonymously completed a questionnaire in their study halls that was administered by classroom teachers. Students were told that the questionnaire concerned "things that happened in families, and that there are no correct answers." They were also told that they could stop completing the questionnaire at any time. A research associate reviewed the survey with the teachers and was available during administration of the survey to answer questions.

After completing the instrument, students took the parent measure to their parent(s), who mailed the completed questionnaire in a postage-paid envelope or had their child return it to the school office. Parent measures were matched to student questionnaires by a common numeric code.

RESULTS

Preliminary Findings Regarding Stepfamily Complexity

Preliminary analyses involving the self-report and parent-report adjustment scores revealed that main effects and interactions involving complexity were nonsignificant. As a result, to increase power, complexity was not included in subsequent analyses.

Comparability of Stepfamily Groups on Demographic Variables

The comparability of the stepfamily groups on demographic scores was tested with a gender of stepparent (stepmother vs. stepfather) x gender of adolescent MANOVA (based on Type III [unique] sums of squares, here and later, because of unequal sample sizes) on age, parental education, family size, number of parental divorces, time since divorce, and frequency of visitation with the noncustodial parent. Relevant means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1. Significant multivariate effects were found for gender of stepparent, $F(6,134) = 2.47, p < .05$, and the gender of stepparent x gender of adolescent interaction $F(6,134) = 3.25, p < .01$. Here and later, multivariate Fs were based on Wilks's lambda.

There was a significant univariate effect for gender of stepparent on frequency of visitation. Students living with stepmothers reported more frequent visits from their nonresidential parents than did those living with stepfathers. In addition, there were significant univariate gender of step-parent x gender of adolescent interactions on age, $F(1,139) = 10.84, p < .001$, and number of divorces, $F(1,139) = 6.42, p < .01$. Tests of simple effects ($p < .05$) at each level of gender revealed that females living with stepmothers were older and had experienced more divorces than females living with stepfathers.

Chi-square analyses, by gender of stepparent and gender of adolescent, were conducted on the categorical demographic variables: grade (sixth vs. seventh), race (nonwhite vs. white), and whether the couple had children since the remarriage (no vs. yes). Table 1 presents percentages on each of these variables by gender of stepparent and gender of adolescent. The only significant relation was between race and gender of step-parent, Yates corrected $\chi^2(1, N = 150) = 11.21, p$

< .001. There was a higher proportion of nonwhite subjects in stepmother than in stepfather families.

Because of these demographic differences, analyses were conducted with age, frequency of visitation, number of divorces, and race as covariates. However, these findings were similar to those obtained from analyses done without the covariates. To simplify presentation, analyses without covariates are presented below.

Gender of Stepparent and Gender of Adolescent Effects on Adjustment

A gender of stepparent (stepmother vs. stepfather) x gender of adolescent MANOVA was computed on the four self-report adjustment measures: grades, health problems, drug usage, and self-esteem. Means and standard deviations on these measures are presented in Table 2 by gender of stepparent and gender of adolescent. The multivariate effect for gender of stepparent was significant, $F(4,143) = 3.00, p < .02$. Univariate ANOVAs revealed that the multivariate effect was due to self-esteem, $F(1,146) = 11.20, p < .001$. As derived from Table 2, students living with stepfathers reported higher self-esteem than did those living with stepmothers.

There was also a multivariate effect for gender of adolescent, $F(4,143) = 4.14, p < .01$. Univariate effects were found on health, $F(1,146) = 6.35, p < .02$, and grades, $F(1,146) = 4.45, p < .05$. As shown in Table 2, females reported more health problems and had better grades than did males. The multivariate gender of stepparent x gender of adolescent interaction was not significant.

A gender of stepparent (stepmother vs. stepfather) x gender of adolescent ANCOVA was computed on social problems with rater (biological parent vs. stepparent) as a covariate. The gender of stepparent main effect was significant, $F(1,57) = 5.49, p < .025$. As revealed in Table 2, students living with stepfathers were reported as having fewer social problems than were those living with stepmothers. The effects of gender of adolescent and the gender of stepparent x gender of adolescent interaction were nonsignificant.

Correlations Between Adjustment and Self-Mastery, Parenting, and Family Process Variables

To determine the extent to which the self-mastery, parenting, and family process variables were related to adjustment, Pearson correlations were computed. Further, because the associations between adjustment and the above process variables may vary depending on the type of stepfamily and the gender of the child (Brand & Clingempeel, 1987), the relations between adjustment and the process variables were computed for the entire sample and separately for four subsamples consisting of males and females living with stepfathers and stepmothers. In addition, partial correlations were computed between parent reports of social problems and the self-mastery, parenting, and family process variables with rater (biological parent vs. stepparent) as the covariate.

Because of the large number of correlations computed, alpha levels were adjusted (with Bonferroni corrections) to control Type I error. Correlations were divided into three sets: self-mastery, parenting variables, and family process variables. Adjusted alpha levels were .01 (.05/5 correlations), .001 (.05/40), and .0006 (.05/90), respectively, for the three sets. Because the sample sizes in the stepmother groups were particularly small and because of the limited nature of previous research on stepmother families, trends in the pattern of correlations were also considered using the traditional $p < .05$ criteria. However, these should be viewed with caution.

Table 3 presents the correlations between the adjustment variables and the self-mastery and parenting variables. Because the pattern of correlations for the subsamples of males and females living with stepfathers and stepmothers was not substantially different than that for the entire sample, only the latter correlations are presented in the table. As hypothesized, using the adjusted alpha levels, self-mastery was significantly positively related to grades and self-esteem and negatively related to health problems and drug usage. A trend correlation ($p < .05$) showed that self-mastery was negatively related to social problems.

With the adjusted alpha levels, none of the parenting variables were significantly related to adjustment. However, trend correlations revealed that adolescents' perceptions of authoritarian parenting, for both their biological parents and stepparents, were negatively related to the self-report adjustment measures. Similarly, in perceptions of biological parents, authoritative parenting was positively related to most adjustment dimensions.

Table 4 presents the correlations between the adjustment and family process variables. Because there were differences in the pattern of correlations for the subsamples of males and females living with stepfathers and stepmothers, the correlations are presented separately for each group. Partial correlations with social problems are only presented for those living with stepfathers and for those living with stepmothers because of the relatively small number of parents who participated. With the adjusted alpha levels, three correlations reached significance: for females in stepmother families, conflict was positively related to health problems and negatively related to self-esteem and warmth was positively related to self-esteem.

Trend correlations revealed the following:

Particularly for those in stepmother families, warmth was positively related to grades and self-esteem, and negatively related to health problems and drug usage. The relations were strongest for girls in stepmother families.

Supervision was positively related to grades and self-esteem, and negatively related to health problems for girls in stepmother families.

Conflict was negatively related to grades and self-esteem, and positively related to health problems and drug usage for girls in stepmother families.

Order and interest were positively related to grades (primarily for boys) and self-esteem (for girls), and, for some subsamples, negatively related to health problems and drug usage.

DISCUSSION

Within a person-process-context model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983), this study examined the extent to which both contextual and process variables related to adolescent adjustment in stepfamilies. Consistent with previous research (Demo & Acock, 1988; Emery, 1982; Grych & Fincham, 1990), there was a higher proportion of significant relations between adjustment and the process variables than there was between adjustment and the family context (i.e., structure) variables.

Within the stepfamily context, this pattern suggests that the process variables have more potent effects on adolescent adjustment than do gender and family structure. Furthermore, as is concordant with Hetherington and Clingempeel (1992), it indicates that family processes have similar effects on adolescents in a variety of different stepfamily and personal contexts. The relative effects of family context and family process on adjustment are discussed below.

Relations Between Family Context and Adjustment

Students living with stepfathers had higher self-esteem and were reported to have fewer social problems than those living with stepmothers. Although these differences were small, and there were no gender of stepparent effects on the other adjustment dimensions, they support clinical impressions (Visher & Visher, 1988). Possible explanations for these differences include the problematic roles that stepmothers encounter (Ihinger-Tallman, 1988) and/or pre-remarriage family or maternal difficulties that resulted in these adolescents living in the relatively rare father-custody arrangement (Clingempeel et al., 1987).

Contrary to expectation, there were no differences in the adjustment of adolescents living in simple and complex stepfamilies. If there is greater stress experienced in complex than simple stepfamilies (Visher & Visher, 1988), the negative sequelae may appear particularly in the early stages of stepfamily development rather than in the later stages sampled in this study. However, the lack of a complexity effect must be interpreted cautiously because the small sample size in the complex stepfamily group reduced the statistical power of the analyses.

Although some investigations have found that girls experience more difficulty in stepfather families than boys (Amato & Keith, 1991; Aquilino, 1991; Bray, 1988; Hetherington et al., 1985; Vuchinich et al., 1991), the present study did not find a gender of stepparent x gender of adolescent interaction in adjustment. It may be that such effects, to the extent that they are present, are more readily seen in observations of behavioral interactions than in self-reports. Consistent with previous research on adolescents in general, girls reported having more health problems (Garber, Walker, & Zeman, 1991) and had better grades (Wentzel, 1991) than did boys.

Relations Between Family Process and Adjustment

Self-mastery was strongly related to each of the self-report adjustment scores and, at the unadjusted alpha level, to few social problems. This suggests that a sense of self-mastery may provide adolescents with a protective buffer against the stress inherent in living in stepfamilies, which is consistent with previous research on adolescents (Luthar, 1991). As with all of the correlations between the adjustment and process variables, two caveats are in order. Because most of these measures were based on adolescent self-reports, shared-method variance may have inflated the magnitude of the correlations. Further, the causal direction of the relations is not clear.

Because this is one of the few studies to report process correlates of adolescents' adjustment in stepfamilies, patterns in these correlational data will be discussed cautiously. Among the parenting variables, there was some indication that adjustment was related to authoritative and authoritarian parenting. As has been found with children in first-marriage families (Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Steinberg et al., 1989) and stepfather families (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992), perceptions of authoritative parenting (by the biological parent) were positively related to several adjustment dimensions and perceptions of authoritarian parenting (by both the biological parent and the stepparent) were negatively related to adjustment.

All of the family process variables were significantly related to adolescent adjustment in at least some subsamples. As has been found in previous studies based mostly on families with two biological parents, adjustment was positively related to supervision (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Crouter et al., 1990), warmth and interest (Maccoby & Martin, 1983), and order (Hetherington et al., 1982), and negatively related to conflict (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Kurdek & Sinclair, 1988). These findings support the argument that the relations between adolescent adjustment and family processes are similar in first-marriage and stepparent families (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992).

An especially interesting pattern was that the relations between the family process variables and adjustment were strongest among females living with stepmothers. Clingempeel et al. (1987) speculate that females in stepmother families may acquire a "privileged status" because the custody of girls may be awarded to fathers only in cases of exceptionally close father-daughter and/or conflictual mother-daughter relationships. Because of their privileged status, girls may perceive the addition of a stepmother into their family as particularly intrusive and invasive. Thus, stresses inherent in the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship and/or the father-daughter relationship may increase the salience of family processes for this group of adolescents.

Within the framework of the person-process-context model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983), these findings also provide direction for future research. Because only gender was used as a personal variable and the context was limited to stepfamilies, it cannot be concluded that personal and contextual variables are unrelated to adolescent

adjustment. Future studies could examine the effects of other personal variables (e.g., length of time in the step-family, age at remarriage) and other contextual variables (e.g., whether the nonresidential parent has remarried, presence of stepsiblings) on adolescent adjustment.

Although there were relatively few significant gender and type of stepfamily differences in adjustment, there was variation in the strength of the relations between family processes and adjustment among subgroups defined by gender of adolescent and gender of the stepparent. If future research replicates the salience of family processes for females living with stepmothers, this would highlight the importance of examining the effects of family processes on adolescents within the context of their gender and type of stepfamily and would underscore the utility of the person-process-context model for research on stepfamilies.

To extend the present findings methodologically, future research would benefit from larger samples, particularly of adolescents in stepmother and complex stepfamilies; more extensive and internally consistent assessments of process and adjustment variables, including behavioral observations and reports from both parents; a more precise measure of family structure that considered the possibility of joint custody arrangements; and longitudinal studies to determine whether initial levels of self-mastery, parenting, and family process variables predict subsequent changes in adjustment. If so, this would strengthen the argument that these process dimensions causally affect the adjustment of adolescents in stepfamilies.

NOTE

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TABLE 1 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS ON DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES BY GENDER OF STEPPARENT AND GENDER OF ADOLESCENT

Legend for Chart:

A - Stepfather: Males

B - Stepfather: Females

C - Stepmother: Males

D - Stepmother: Females

A B C D

Age	M	12.42	12.28	12.33	13.24
	SD	.89	.79	1.11	.66
Parental education	M	3.88	3.88	4.36	3.80
	SD	1.11	1.10	1.29	.86
Family size	M	2.17	2.55	2.80	2.29
	SD	1.66	1.63	1.61	1.26
No. divorces					
experienced	M	1.12	1.05	1.00	1.29
	SD	.32	.22	.00	.59
Time since divorce	M	3.58	3.64	3.47	3.53
	SD	.79	.58	.64	.62
Frequency of					
visitation	M	2.67	2.72	3.40	3.12
	SD	1.36	1.21	.99	.86
% white		95.0	96.6	66.7	82.4
% in seventh grade		48.3	53.4	40.0	70.6
% parents had own					
children		38.3	46.6	33.3	64.7
n		60	58	15	17

Note: For parent education, 1 = 8 or fewer years of school, 6 = degree after college. For time since divorce, 1 = within the past year, 4 = more than 7 years ago. For frequency of visitation, 1 = never, 5 = every day.

TABLE 2 MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS ON ADJUSTMENT VARIABLES BY GENDER OF STEPPARENT AND GENDER OF ADOLESCENT

Legend for Chart:

A - Stepfather: Males

B - Stepfather: Females

C - Stepmother: Males

D - Stepmother: Females

		A	B	C	D
Grades	M	2.47	2.63	2.11	2.68
	SD	1.01	.75	.69	.83
Health problems	M	17.63	21.09	19.67	20.18
	SD	3.58	3.58	5.14	5.09
Drug usage	M	5.68	6.22	5.73	6.18
	SD	1.44	1.90	1.28	2.43
Self-esteem	M	31.80	28.34	26.40	26.06
	SD	4.68	5.69	7.44	7.58
Social problems	M	40.20	39.66	44.00	41.33
	SD	6.12	5.60	6.48	3.88

Note: For grades, health problems, drug usage, and self-esteem, n's for stepfather males, stepfather females, stepmother males, and stepmother females were 60, 58, 15, and 17, respectively. For social problems, n's were 25, 32, 7, and 6. For social problems, means were adjusted for rater (biological parent vs. stepparent).

TABLE 3 PEARSON CORRELATIONS BETWEEN ADJUSTMENT VARIABLES AND SELF-MASTERY AND PARENTING VALUES

Legend for Chart:

A - Grades

B - Health Problems

C - Drug Usage

D - Self-Esteem

E - Social Problems

A	B	C	D	E
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Self-mastery

.36[b]	-.38[b]	-.27[b]	.59[b]	-.27[a]
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Parenting Variables

Permissiveness (B)

-.06	.04	.01	.13	.12
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Permissiveness (S)

-.00	.01	.00	.22[a]	-.03
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Authoritarian (B)

-.27[a]	.16[a]	.14[a]	-.19[a]	.07
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Authoritarian (S)

-.14[a]	.14[a]	-.07	-.20[a]	.14
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Authoritative (B)

.10 -.24[a] -.19[a] .22[a] .19

Authoritative (S)

.04 -.09 -.06 .12 .06

Adjunctive (B)

-.12 .03 -.06 -.06 .27[a]

Adjunctive (S)

.06 .09 -.05 -.00 .12

Note: B refers to the biological parent version of the scale, S refers to the stepparent version of the scale. The first row of correlations is for the total sample. N for the self-report measures was 150. N for social problems was 70. For social problems, partial correlations are reported with rater (biological parent vs. stepparent) as the covariate.

a $p < .05$. b adjusted $p < .01$ (for self-mastery) or $p < .001$ (for parent variables).

TABLE 4 PEARSON CORRELATIONS BETWEEN ADJUSTMENT VARIABLES AND FAMILY PROCESS VARIABLES

Legend for Chart:

A - Grades: M

B - Grades: F

C - Health Problems: M

D - Health Problems: F

E - Drug Usage: M

F - Drug Usage: F

G - Self-Esteem: M

H - Self-Esteem: F

I - Social Problems

A	B	C	D	E
F	G	H	I	

Warmth

Stepfather

.18	.21	-.01	-.17	-.20
-.25[a]	.07	.22[a]	.07	

Stepmother

.55[a]	.48[a]	-.67[b]	-.53[a]	.54[a]
-.46[a]	.56[a]	.78[c]	.43	

Supervision

Stepfather

.14	.02	-.01	-.01	-.24[a]
-.23[a]	-.01	.14	.15	

Stepmother

.42	.60[b]	.06	-.63[b]	-.02
-.21	.08	.70[b]	.35	

Conflict

Stepfather

-.11	-.26[a]	.14	.29[a]	.10
.36[b]	-.23[a]	-.18	.12	

Stepmother

-.12	-.68[b]	.39	.82[c]	-.60[b]
.54[a]	-.44	-.81[c]	.06	

Order

Stepfather

.10	-.05	-.17	-.28[a]	-.06
.10	.20	.24[a]	.11	

Stepmother

.66[b]	.21	-.16	-.21	-.15
-.52[a]	.10	.36	.53[a]	

Interest

Stepfather

.36[b]	.30[a]	.02	-.21	-.25[a]
-.19	.00	.21	-.01	

Stepmother

.48[a]	.21	-.48[a]	-.28	.41
-.28	.26	.62[b]	.55[a]	

Note: n's for the self-report measures were 60, 58, 15, and 17 for males in stepfather families, females in stepfather families, males in stepmother families, and females in stepmother families, respectively; n's for social problems were 57 and 13 for stepfather and stepmother families, respectively. For social problems, partial correlations are reported with rater (biological parent vs. stepparent) as the covariate.

a $p < .05$. b $p < .01$. c adjusted $p < .0006$.

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