

## 'Contributing to a field of investigation': A response to Pasley.

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### **Abstract:**

I find myself in general agreement with Pasley with respect to desired directions for stepfamily research and certainly concur that future studies need to (1) move beyond simple "deficit comparison" designs, (2) be more sensitive to variations in stepfamilies by assessing subgroup differences, and (3) use multiple measures from multiple sources. Although our study has limitations in all three areas, we believe that at this early stage in our understanding of how now-adult children perceive the quality of their parent-child relationships in stepfamilies, studies such as ours provide some initial information from which later studies can build. For the remainder of my response, I will refer to each of the three areas cited above.

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### **Article:**

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Deficit comparison design

Although research clearly needs to progress beyond such designs, it is helpful in the early phases of investigation (there are few empirical studies of the perceived quality of parent-child relationships in stepfamilies) to make comparisons across different family structures. We did not use intact families as our comparison group because they represent optimal or ideal family functioning, but rather because they serve as a benchmark for comparison with which many are familiar. Stepfamilies certainly are qualitatively different from other family structures; however,

we believe that the quality of perceived parent-child relationships is a dimension common to both types of families. As a passing note, we were very careful to indicate that our results do not suggest any intrinsic dysfunction in stepmother families.

### Complexity of stepfamilies

We agree that we did not fully examine the structural complexity of stepfamilies, other than the stepmother versus stepfather family comparison (a comparison one seldom finds in this literature, because of the relative infrequency of stepmother families). Once again, we argue that at this stage of research, we need to understand how parent-child relationships are perceived in the aggregate of stepfamilies. When this is accomplished, future studies should certainly explore the important subgroup differences.

We agree with Pasley that we should have controlled for whether subjects became members of stepfamilies through parental divorce or death, as there is considerable evidence that the stepfamily experience differs depending on whether its origins lie in divorce or parental death.

With respect to the structural complexity of stepfamilies, it should be noted that we also explored the association between the quality of perceived stepparent-stepchild relationships and three possible mediating variables-child's age at the time of remarriage, the length of time between divorce or death and remarriage, and the perceived quality of noncustodial parent-child relationships. Regression analyses revealed that none of these three mediating variables contributed a significant portion of the variation in perceived quality of stepparent-stepchild relationships. Therefore, we collapsed across these three mediating variables and studied stepmother and stepfather families in aggregate. These analyses were not reported in our article due to space limitations.

### Single-measure, single-source designs

There are certainly limitations with single-measure, single-source designs, particularly when different measures are used across studies. We chose the Parent-Child Relationships Survey, because previous studies had suggested that it has good psychometric properties and because we know of no other psychometrically established written instruments that assess the construct of perceived quality of parent-child relationships. Much of the literature in the area of perceived parent-child relationships assesses this dimension on the basis of a single item, much less a single measure. I am curious regarding which "more established instrument" Pasley has in mind that we should have used and would welcome learning of such a measure.

We appreciate the constructive nature of Pasley's comments and are planning investigations in this area that more adequately address limitations in previous stepfamily research.