

## The relation between marital quality and (step)parent-child relationship quality for parents and stepparents in stepfamilies.

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### **Abstract:**

This study examined the relation between perceived marital quality and the perceived quality of the (step)parent-child relationship in 2 independent samples of couples living in stepfamilies. In Sample 1, participants were both spouses in 111 stepmother families and 92 stepfather families recruited from the Stepfamily Association of America. In Sample 2, participants were both spouses in 442 stepfather families and 75 stepmother families who participated in the National Survey of Families and Households. Within families, for both samples, the relation between perceived marital quality and the perceived quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship was stronger than that between perceived marital quality and the perceived quality of the biological parent-child relationship.

**Keywords:** psychology | family psychology | parent-child relationships | stepfamilies | step-parents

### **Article:**

From a family systems perspective (cf. Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993), families with children are composed of three key subsystems: the husband-wife (marital) subsystem, the father-child subsystem, and the mother-child subsystem. Understanding how functioning in the marital subsystem is related to functioning in each of the two parent-child subsystems may enhance understanding of how parents and children reciprocally influence each other (Feldman, Wentzel, Weinberger, & Munson, 1990; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Furthermore, because marriage and family therapists have reported that problems with children often co-occur with marital problems (Margolin, 1981), understanding the nature of the links among these subsystems may provide a basis for targeting interventions more effectively at either the marital or parent-child subsystem

level (see Emery, Fincham, & Cummings, 1992; Fauber & Long, 1991; Fincham, Grych, & Osborne, 1994).

On the basis of current systems theories (Feldman et al., 1990; Fincham et al., 1994), which posit that marital interaction and parent–child interaction reciprocally influence each other, the quality of relations in the marital subsystem could be posited to be positively associated with the quality of each of the parent–child relationships. Indeed, most studies of first-marriage families have found that marital quality is positively related to warm and sensitive responding by both fathers and mothers (Cox, Tresch Owen, Lewis, & Henderson, 1989), to the child’s secure attachment to fathers and mothers (Howes & Markman, 1989), and to the positivity of fathers’ attitudes toward their children (Cox et al., 1989). In addition, marital quality in these families is negatively related to fathers’ and mothers’ use of guilt and anxiety induction as a means of discipline (Fauber, Forehand, Thomas, & Wierson, 1990) and to mothers’ reciprocating children’s negative affect (Kerig, Cowan, & Cowan, 1993). However, some researchers have reported that the quality of the father–child and mother–child relationships was negatively related to the quality of the marital relationship. For example, Brody, Pellegrini, and Sigel (1986) found that higher quality or more involved parenting was negatively associated with marital happiness.

The majority of studies that have examined the association between the perceived quality of relations in the marital and parent–child subsystems have been conducted with first-marriage families. However, there is reason to believe that the nature of the relations among these subsystems may be particularly important in stepfamilies. Specifically, there is both empirical (Crosbie-Burnett, 1984) and clinical (Visher & Visher, 1988) evidence to suggest that the quality of the stepparent–stepchild relationship has a strong effect on the marital relationship. Consequently, our focus in this article was on biological parents and stepparents living in stepfamilies. Our purpose was to examine the extent to which biological parents’ and stepparents’ perceptions of the quality of the same marital relationship were related to their perceptions of the quality of their relationships with their child and stepchild, respectively. Furthermore, to determine the extent to which the observed relations are robust, we analyzed data from two independent samples. When there were multiple children in the home, we focused on the parents’ and stepparents’ relationship with a single child (the “target” child).

Similar to studies of first-marriage families that have found positive relations between perceived marital quality and the perceived quality of each of the parent–child relationships, researchers studying stepfamilies have also generally found positive relations between the perceived quality of the marriage and the perceived quality of both the stepparent–stepchild relationship and the parent–child relationship (Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hobart, 1988). However, two studies have found that child gender, type of stepfamily, and the length of time that the stepfamily has been in existence (stepfamily age) moderated the relation between the perceived quality of the marital subsystem and the (step)parent–child subsystems.

In the first of these studies, Brand, Clingempeel, and Bowen-Woodward (1988) found that the quality of marital relations (assessed by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale administered to the stepparent) was negatively associated with the quality of stepmother–stepdaughter relationships (assessed by behavioral interaction codes derived from the Family Problem Solving System). However, for stepmother families with stepsons and for stepfather families with either stepsons or stepdaughters, the quality of marital relations was generally positively associated with the quality of stepparent–stepchild relations. In the second study, Hetherington (1989), on the basis of Dyadic Adjustment Scale scores and codings of behavioral interactions, reported findings similar to Brand et al. for stepfather families with stepdaughters; however, for stepfather families with stepsons, the quality of the marriage was negatively related to the quality of the parent–child relationship only in the first 2 years of the remarriage.

Although positive relations between marital quality and the quality of each of the (step)parent–child relationships have generally been found in both first-marriage and stepparent families, there is reason to believe that the nature of the relation between perceived quality in the marital subsystem and the two (step)parent–child subsystems may differ to a greater extent in stepfamilies than in first-marriage families. In a first-marriage family, spouses typically have time to establish their marital relationship before they have a child, and both spouses become parents at the same time. There may be a positive relation between perceived quality in the marital subsystem and each of the parent–child subsystems for biological parents (Cox et al., 1989; Howes & Markman, 1989) because the father–child and mother–child subsystems are positive outgrowths of the marital subsystem.

By contrast, in a stepfamily, the biological parent–child relationship precedes the marital relationship and the stepparent–stepchild relationship. When a stepfamily is formed, the biological parent already has an established relationship with the child, whereas the stepparent is in the early stages of developing a relationship with this child. Despite the relative lack of a shared history and a sense of commitment in the stepparent–stepchild relationship, we believe that this dyad should be considered a subsystem of the stepfamily system because of its central importance to stepfamily functioning (Crosbie-Burnett, 1984; Fine & Kurdek, 1994a). Because of these differences between the parent–child and the stepparent–child subsystems, it is plausible that the relation between the parent–child subsystem and the marital subsystem for biological parents is different than the relation between the stepparent–stepchild subsystem and the marital subsystem for stepparents (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992).

For biological parents in stepfamilies, the shared history and the pattern of interaction between parent and child are likely to result in a relationship that is relatively stable in quality and separate from the marital relationship. Consequently, we posit that there are relatively impermeable boundaries between the parent–child subsystem and the marital subsystem.

By contrast, for stepparents in stepfamilies, the boundaries between the stepparent–stepchild subsystem and the marital subsystem may be relatively permeable. During the dating process,

because the stepparent-to-be is likely to consider his or her prospective spouse and her or his child as an integrated package, affective reactions toward the spouse and stepchild are likely to be positively linked. Following remarriage, and probably lasting for at least the next several years, this affective linkage involving the spouse and stepchild is likely to continue for stepparents. The interconnected nature of the stepparent–stepchild and marital subsystems is supported by findings showing that the presence of stepchildren increases the likelihood that remarriages will end in divorce ( White & Booth, 1985).

Therefore, because we propose that the boundaries between the (step)parent–child and marital subsystems are more permeable for stepparents than for biological parents, we hypothesized that the relation between the perceived quality of the marriage and the perceived quality of the stepparent–stepchild relationship would be stronger than that between the perceived quality of the marriage and the perceived quality of the parent–child relationship.

The present study extended previous research in four ways. First, we independently assessed the perceived quality of the marriage and the (step)parent–child relationship. For example, Hobart (1988) assessed marital quality by asking respondents how their (step)parent–child relationships affected their spousal relationships, which confounded marital quality with the perceived quality of the (step)parent–child relationship. Second, because spouses may have differing views of the quality of their marriage, we examined both spouses' (i.e., the biological parent's and the stepparent's) perceptions of their marital quality rather than use a composite measure averaged across spouses (e.g., Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Third, the present study included relatively large samples of both stepfather and stepmother couples. The inclusion of spouses in stepmother families is noteworthy, given that most previous studies have included only members of stepfather families (e.g., Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Finally, unlike any previous studies we could find, we assessed whether several variables moderate the hypothesized differences in the relation between the marital and the (step)parent–child subsystems.

In the present study, four variables were considered as possible moderators because they have been shown to be related to stepfamily functioning. Because of evidence that stepmothers have more conflictual interactions with stepchildren than do stepfathers ( Brand et al., 1988; Ihinger-Tallman, 1988), the first moderator variable examined was type of stepfamily (stepfather vs. stepmother). Given findings that the presence of boys in a household reduces the likelihood of eventual parental divorce ( Morgan, Lye, & Condran, 1988) and that stepparents are more likely to oppose and confront male stepchildren than female stepchildren ( Ganong & Coleman, 1994), the second moderating variable considered was child gender. Because adolescents may have more conflictual interactions with stepparents than younger children ( Hetherington, 1989; Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989), the third moderator variable examined was the age of the child. Finally, because of previous findings that the first 2 years following parental remarriage are characterized by particularly poor parent–child and stepparent–child relations ( Hetherington, 1989), the final moderator variable considered was stepfamily age. Because of an

absence of relevant previous literature, the examination of possible moderator effects was exploratory.

## Method

### Sample 1

#### Participants

Participants were both spouses from 111 step-mother–father couples and 92 mother–stepfather couples who participated in a larger study of stepfamilies (Fine & Kurdek, 1994b) recruited from the Stepfamily Association of America. Respondents were asked to identify a target child by selecting the oldest child between the ages of 5 and 15 years living in the home.

To be included in the study, couples had to meet the following criteria: (a) the couple was currently married, (b) the biological parent of the target child had been married previously, with the prior marriage(s) ending in divorce, (c) both the husband and wife completed a survey, and (d) the target child lived in the home for at least 3 days per week during the school year.

Parental respondents had a mean of 15.69 years of education, their mean age was 39.94 years, the mean length of the current marriage was 3.35 years, the mean annual family income in 1992 was in the \$70,000 to \$80,000 range, and almost all (97%) were White. Given that over half (57%) of adults 25 years or older in the United States had 12 or fewer years of education in 1992 and that the median family income in 1992 (in 1991 dollars) was \$35,939 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992), we concluded that families in this sample were of high socioeconomic status. With respect to the target child, 103 were boys and 100 were girls, and their mean age was 12.01 years. Mother–stepfather and father–stepmother couples did not significantly differ on demographic or divorce history variables.

#### Instrumentation

##### Demographic information

Respondents provided demographic information about themselves and their target child, including information pertaining to the four moderator variables—type of stepfamily, child gender, child age, and stepfamily age.

##### Quality of the (step)parent child relationship

Respondents completed two items related to the perceived quality of the (step)parent–child relationship. They were asked to rate on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 4 = moderately, 7 = extremely) how “satisfied you are with your relationship with your (step)child” and how “satisfied you are with your performance as a father/mother/stepfather/stepmother.” Pearson product–moment correlations between the two items were .77, .70, .78, and .72 for fathers,

mothers, stepfathers, and stepmothers, respectively (all  $p$ 's < .001). Because of these high correlations, a summed composite score was used in subsequent analyses.

### Marital quality

Respondents completed two items related to perceived marital quality. They were asked to indicate on the same 7-point scale as used above how “satisfied you are with your marriage” and how “committed you are to your marriage.” Pearson product–moment correlations between the two items were .63, .77, .64, and .62 for fathers, mothers, stepfathers, and stepmothers, respectively (all  $p$ 's < .001). Because of these high correlations, a summed composite score was used in subsequent analyses.

### Procedure

A cover letter that requested that the husband and wife complete the surveys independently, separate instruction sheets for the husband and wife, two versions of the survey (e.g., father and stepmother), and two postage-paid return envelopes were sent to all 1,440 noninstitutional members of the Stepfamily Association of America. Three to four weeks later, a reminder postcard was sent to those who had not yet returned their surveys. The overall response rate to the survey was 37%, although only 38% of those couples who returned surveys met the inclusion criteria established for the study.

### Sample 2

#### Procedure and Participants

Data were drawn from the 1987–1988 National Survey of Families and Households (Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988). In each household, a primary respondent was identified, interviewed, and asked to complete a self-administered questionnaire. In addition, if available, spouses were given a self-administered questionnaire to complete. On questions related to children, respondents were asked about a randomly selected child in the family (the “focal” child). The response rate was 74% of households that were successfully screened and met the inclusion criteria (Sweet et al., 1988).

For purposes of this study, the following inclusion criteria were established: (a) respondents had children under the age of 19, (b) respondents were currently married, (c) only one of the spouses was a stepparent to the focal child and the marriage of the focal child’s biological parent ended with divorce, and (d) respondents and their spouses both participated in the survey. These criteria resulted in 442 spouses in stepfather and 75 spouses in stepmother families.

Parental respondents had a mean of 12.74 years of education, their mean age was 34.70 years, the mean length of the current marriage was 4.88 years, the mean total annual family income in 1987 or 1988 was \$42,086, and 81% were White. Given that more than three fifths (61%) of U.S. adults over the age of 25 years had 12 or fewer years of education in 1990 and that the median

family income in 1990 (in 1991 dollars) was \$37,600 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990), we concluded that families in this sample were of middle to upper-middle socioeconomic status. With respect to the focal children, 255 were boys and 262 were girls, and their mean age was 9.89 years. The only significant types of stepfamily differences were that stepmother couples, relative to stepfather couples, had higher mean total family incomes (\$54,471 vs. \$40,044, respectively) and were more likely to be White (91% vs. 79%, respectively).

## Measures

### Demographic variables

Respondents provided basic demographic information pertaining to the four moderator variables—type of stepfamily, child gender, child age, and stepfamily age.

### Marital quality

Marital quality was assessed by 11 items. Respondents were asked to rate their overall happiness with their marriage (0 = very unhappy, 7 = very happy ); how much time they spent with their spouse alone in the last month (1 = never, 6 = almost every day ); how often they disagree with their spouse regarding the completion of household tasks, money, spending time together, having another child, in-laws, and the children (1 = never, 6 = almost every day ); whether they had ever thought that the marriage was in trouble in the last year (0 = no, 1 = yes ); and the chances of divorce (1 = very high, 5 = very low). Cronbach's alphas for the summed composite scores were .85, .82, .80, and .88 for fathers, mothers, stepfathers, and stepmothers, respectively.

### Perceptions of quality of (step)parent child relationship

(Step)parent-child relationship quality was measured by one item that asked participants, "How would you describe your relationship with each child?" Response options ranged from 1 ( very poor) to 7 ( excellent). Only the responses for the focal child were analyzed.

## Results

In each sample, two Pearson product-moment correlations were initially computed. For the biological parent in the couple, a correlation was computed between the perceived quality of the marriage and the perceived quality of the parent-child relationship. For the stepparent in the couple, a correlation was computed between the perceived quality of the marriage and the perceived quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Of primary interest was whether the difference between these two correlations was statistically significant.

To determine whether the difference between these two correlations was moderated by type of stepfamily, child gender, child age, or stepfamily age, separate correlations were computed at each of two levels for each moderator variable. Accordingly, separate correlations between perceived marital quality and perceived (step)parent-child relationship quality were computed

for biological parents and stepparents according to whether (step)parents (a) were in stepfather or stepmother families, (b) were rating a male or female target child, (c) were rating a young child or an older child (determined by a median split on child age in each sample), and (d) lived in an early stepfamily or a later stepfamily (determined by a median split on stepfamily age in each sample).

Table 1 contains the results from both Sample 1 and Sample 2. As shown in the table, *t* tests for the difference between two dependent correlations revealed that the correlation between perceived quality of the marriage and perceived quality of the stepparent–stepchild relationship was significantly higher than was the correlation between perceived quality of the marriage and perceived quality of the parent–child relationship for the total sample and for each of the subgroups defined by the moderator variables in both samples, with one partial exception. In Sample 1, the difference between the two correlations for those spouses in stepmother families was only marginally significant.

**Table 1 is omitted from this formatted document**

## Discussion

The results of this study support the hypothesis that the relation between perceived quality in the marital and (step)parent–child subsystems would be stronger for stepparents than for biological parents. This effect was robust, as the hypothesis was generally supported across all levels of the possible moderator variables. Furthermore, we found similar findings in two nationally recruited samples that differed in socioeconomic status: On the basis of a comparison with U.S. census data (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990, 1992), couples in the sample from the Stepfamily Association of America were generally of high socioeconomic status, whereas those in the sample from the National Survey of Families and Households were generally of middle to upper-middle socioeconomic status.

Unlike in first-marriage families, where the marital subsystem has similar relations to the father–child and mother–child subsystems (Cox et al., 1989; Howes & Markman, 1989), our findings suggest that the marital subsystem in stepfamilies is differentially related to the parent–child and stepparent–stepchild subsystems. These findings are inconsistent with previous studies of stepfamilies, which have generally found that the perceived quality of the marriage was positively related to the perceived quality of both the stepparent–stepchild relationship and the parent–child relationship (Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hobart, 1988). The inconsistency may be explained by differences in methodologies, as our study is the only one that we are aware of that has acquired independent ratings of both spouses' perceptions of the quality of the marriage and of both the parent–child and stepparent–stepchild relationships.

These findings support the notion that, for spouses in stepfamilies, the boundary between the marital subsystem and the stepparent–stepchild subsystem is more permeable than that between the marital subsystem and the biological parent–child subsystem. Relative to biological parents

in stepfamilies, positive and negative experiences that stepparents have in one subsystem are more likely to affect their perceptions in the other subsystem. From a family systems perspective, these findings are of interest because they suggest that boundaries between subsystems in stepfamilies, unlike in first-marriage families, may be differentially permeable for different family members.

To explain this greater permeability between subsystems for stepparents relative to biological parents, we posit that stepparents' relationships with their spouse and stepchild are affectively linked because these relationships begin and develop simultaneously. In addition to this affective linkage, there may also be a cognitive dimension to the relative permeability between subsystems for stepparents. When problems arise in the stepparent–stepchild relationship, stepparents may partially attribute these difficulties to action (or inaction) by the biological parent (e.g., the stepparent perceives that the biological parent has taken the stepchild's side in a dispute rather than the stepparent's). By contrast, when difficulties arise in the parent–child relationship, biological parents, because of their shared history and the relatively stable relationship with their child, are less likely to attribute the source of these problems to the stepparent.

The primary clinical implication of these findings is that biological parents and stepparents may have differing perceptions of the nature of their difficulties. Whereas biological parents may consider marital problems to be separate from difficulties arising from their parent–child relationship, stepparents are likely to believe that there is a link between marital difficulties and problems in their relationship with their stepchild. The impact of these differing outlooks between parents and stepparents is likely to be particularly salient when couples in stepfamilies present for marital problems. In such cases, clinicians need to be aware that the stepparent is likely to link such problems to the (step)child to a greater extent than the biological parent.

Several limitations of these data sets indicate the need for future research. First, caution should be exercised in interpreting the results from this study because of the use of a single-item measure and two 2-item measures. If feasible, future studies should use existing measures with established psychometric properties. Second, because of the correlational nature of the design, inferences regarding the causal relations between perceived quality in the marital and (step)parent–child subsystems cannot be made. Longitudinal studies that assess perceptions of the quality in each subsystem over time would be helpful in beginning to identify the causal link between these variables. Third, because the quality of relations in the (step)parent–child subsystem was assessed only from the perceptions of spouses, it would be helpful to replicate the present results with (step)children's perceptions about their relations with their (step)parents and observational data on the quality of (step)parent–child interactions. Finally, we assessed spouses' perceptions of the quality of their relations with only one (step)-child in the family. Because the relations among subsystems are likely to be more complex when the quality of multiple (step)parent–child relations are considered, future studies should assess the perceived quality of all (step)parent–child relationships in the stepfamily.

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