

The dyad is not enough

Third-party mediation as a precondition for cohesion in long-term step relationships

Abstract

The increasing prevalence of ageing stepfamilies and the potential of stepchildren to act as a source of support for older parents have increased the interest in long-term intergenerational step relationships. Applying a life-course perspective combined with Simmel's theorizing on social dynamics, this exploratory study aims to investigate the preconditions for cohesion in long-term intergenerational step relationships. The study is based on interviews with 13 older parents, aged 66–79, who have raised both biological children and stepchildren. Retrospective life-course interviews were used to capture the development of step relationships over time. Interviews were analysed following the principles of analytical induction. The results reveal four central third-party relationships that are important for cohesion in intergenerational step relationships over time, involving: (1) the intimate partner; (2) the non-residential parent; (3) the bridge child; and (4) the stepchild-in-law. The findings have led to the conclusion that if we are to understand the unique conditions for cohesion in long-term intergenerational step relationships, we cannot simply compare biological parent–child dyads with step dyads, because the step relationship is essentially a mediated relationship.

Key words: life course, linked lives, mediating relationships, older step-parents, step relationships

THE RISE OF divorce culture (Hackstaff 1999) in many parts of the Western world in the 1960s and 1970s and the concurrent deinstitutionalization of family life (Giddens 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Cherlin 2004; Bildtgård & Öberg 2017) has led to increased heterogeneity in family relationships among current older cohorts (Connidis 2020). Increasing numbers of older people have raised stepchildren (for Sweden, see Evertsson & Magnusson 2014), and many of these parent–child relationships persist in later life. In the US in 2012 roughly 40 per cent of middle-aged and older couples (51+ years of age) with children were in a relationship where at least one partner had a stepchild (Lin, Brown & Cupka 2018). The purpose of this exploratory study is to investigate the preconditions for cohesion in long-term intergenerational step relationships.

The increasing prevalence of ageing stepfamilies and the potential of stepchildren to act as a source of support for older parents have prompted research about intergenera-

tional cohesion in step relationships. Much of this research has investigated differences in the quality of relationships between parents and adult children in biological versus step dyads. To capture differences in relationship quality between step and biological child–parent dyads, DeLongis and Preece (2002) coined the concept of *stepgap*. A consequence of the comparative ambition has been that much research on ageing stepfamilies has focused on capturing this expected difference through cross-sectional studies of dyadic parent–child relationships in biological families and stepfamilies.

Studies of ageing stepfamilies have sought evidence for a stepgap within different dimensions of the intergenerational relationship. Some studies have found that step-parents have weaker emotional contact (Arránz Becker, Salzburger, Lois *et al.* 2013; Kalmijn 2013) and lower contact frequency (Ward, Spitze & Deane 2009) with their adult children than do biological parents, while others have presented more mixed results (Steinbach & Hank 2016). Some studies have found evidence of less intergenerational exchange in ageing stepfamilies than in ageing biological families (Amato, Rezac & Booth 1995; Pezzin & Schone 1999; Aquilino 2005; Pezzin, Pollak & Schone 2008) and that having only stepchildren can increase the risk for ill health, institutionalization and lower life expectancy in older mothers (Pezzin, Pollak & Schone 2013). Ganong and Coleman (2006) reported that people in general tend to think the moral duty for adult children to provide support for their biological parents is bigger than for step-parents, and that the duty to provide support for step-parents is a question of serial reciprocity – it depends on the help that step-parents have provided for their stepchildren earlier in life.

Quantitative studies of intergenerational cohesion in ageing stepfamilies have generated important knowledge, but they also have limitations. Coleman and Ganong (1990; Ganong & Coleman 2017) used the label “deficit-comparative” to describe studies that take the nuclear family as their reference point and demonstrate how stepfamilies fail to function as well as biological families. They argued that a more fruitful approach would be to look at the functioning of the stepfamily in its own right. A similar criticism can be levelled at comparing biological relationships with step relationships.

The problem of using the biological family or relationship as a normative reference point is compacted in quantitative research where variables and their values are typically predefined and based on theoretical assumptions about the nuclear family. For a more neutral view of what characterizes step relationships, we need explorative studies that compare biological and step relations without taking the former as the norm. Without qualitative comparisons it is difficult to identify the characteristic traits of the step relationship. In the following we will argue that one essential defining trait of the step dyad that distinguishes it from the biological dyad, and that is central to understanding its long-term cohesion, is its dependence on third-party mediating relationships.

Studies that follow the development of step relationships over time have shown how sensitive the step dyad is to transitions involving *third parties* in the family system. Some studies have noted that the step relationship is dependent on the relationship

between the step-parent and his or her partner, the biological parent (Ganong & Coleman 2006; Schmeeckle, Giarrusso, Feng *et al.* 2006; Hans, Ganong & Coleman 2009; Klaus, Nauck & Steinbach 2012; Noël-Miller 2013; Coleman, Ganong, Russell *et al.* 2015). Weaver and Coleman (2010) noted that biological mothers tend to act as mediators between stepfathers and stepchildren, shaping their relationship. Noël-Miller (2013) reported that the contact frequency between adult children and step-parents diminished rapidly when the parental relationship was dissolved – quicker if they separated than if the step-parent was widowed, but diminishing in both cases. Similarly, Schmeeckle, Giarrusso, Feng and Bengtson (2006) found that adult children were more likely to view their step-parents as parents if the parent couple were married than unmarried, and less likely to view them as parents if they had separated from their (the adult children's) biological parent than if they were still a couple. Coleman, Ganong, Russell and Frye-Cox (2015) made the same observation in a study about stepfamily dissolution through divorce. The extent to which adult children continued to claim their step-parents as family, post-divorce, was dependent on the continued relationship between the parent and the step-parent, primarily because children tended to be loyal to their biological parent. Klaus, Nauck and Steinbach (2012) similarly found that the emotional relationship between adult children and their stepfathers was dependent on the maternal relationship: if the relationship between the child and the biological mother was good, the relationship between the adult child and his or her stepfather was more likely to be close. These authors also found that the continuity of the step relationship was strongly based on the continuity of the relationship between the step-parent and the biological parent. All these studies show how the step dyad is dependent on the mediating third party: the biological parent.

Another third party that may impact on step relationships is the non-residential biological parent. Klaus, Nauck and Steinbach (2012; see also Schrodtt 2011) have pointed out that in stepfather families the stepfather and the biological father have to adapt to each other, but that the residential biological mother tends to decide the degree of involvement of the respective fathers with her children. Marsiglio and Hinojosa (2007) showed that even if biological fathers can sometimes act as allies to stepfathers, as a way of maintaining contact with their children, the relationship between the two fathers depends on the biological mother's relationship with her ex-partner. Both these studies showed how the relationship history of the biological mother is key to the stepfather–child relationship. Has she been widowed or divorced? Is the biological father absent or present? Does he collaborate? Vinick and Lanspery (2000) showed that the relationship between adult children and older step-parents tended to be better if the biological parent had been widowed than if he or she was divorced. One reason was that in the case of widowhood there were no competing loyalties between step-parents and non-residential biological parents.

Yet another third party that has been assumed to impact on the step relationship is a child common to both parents in the restructured family. A common child has been suggested to increase family integration by forming a bond of blood between family members. Ganong and Coleman (2017) described this as the “concrete baby

effect” – referring to the child’s assumed effect of cementing family bonds. However, empirical evidence of this effect is mixed. Compared with stepfamilies without common children, family boundary ambiguity has been shown to be lower in stepfamilies that also include children common to both parents (Stewart 2005a), but parental involvement with stepchildren has not been shown to be stronger in these families (Stewart 2005b).

All of the above studies of stepfamily development have provided different puzzle pieces hinting at the step dyad being dependent on mediating third-party relationships. Some studies have shown the impact of partners, others of non-residential parents, while yet others have shown the impact of common children. However, to our knowledge no prior study has provided a coherent perspective on the importance of third-party relationships as a precondition for cohesion in the step relationship over the life course.

In this exploratory study of the preconditions for cohesion in long-term inter-generational step relationships, we found that older people tended to talk about the development of the relationship with their biological children in terms of a dyad. By contrast, they talked about the development of the stepchild relationship in terms of third parties. A central inductive finding was that the step relationship is essentially a *mediated relationship*, and that cohesion in the step dyad over time cannot be fully understood without this insight.

Theory

In a previous article (Bildtgård & Öberg 2020) we demonstrated that older parents tend to feel emotionally closer to their biological children than to their stepchildren, and that adult children tend to feel emotionally closer to their biological parents than to their step-parents. We also showed that step relationships run a risk of being “un-claimed” as family relations, and that they tend to be more fragile over the life course. The basis for the present article is the empirically generated insight that cohesion in the step relationship over the life course tends to depend primarily on mediating third-party relationships, and only secondarily on the direct dyadic relationship between the step-parent and their stepchild. Hence the title of the article: “The dyad is not enough”.

To describe how third-party relationships affect the step relationship over time we use the concept of linked lives from life-course theory, as well as Simmel’s theorizing on social dynamics in dyads and triads (1908). Elder (1996) presents linked lives as a central principle of life-course theory. It is through the people that we are directly linked to, that we experience the weight of the social world: “Human lives are typically embedded in particular configurations of social relationships with kin, friends, and others across the life span. Social regulation, support, and patterning occur in part through these relationships” (Elder 1996:36). The concept of linked lives emphasizes that many major events in the life course are the consequences of choices made, not by the individuals themselves, but by important people they are linked to. For example, a child becomes a stepchild through the dissolution of their parents’ union and one

of the parents' later repartnering – and neither transition is directly a choice of their own. The step relationship tends to remain dependent on the biological parent for its development over the life course. This implies that lives are shaped not only dyadically in relation to individual others, but often in relation to triads or wider networks of interdependent people.

To illustrate and discuss how third parties can affect cohesion in the step relationship over the life course we follow Simmel's (1908) theorizing on social dynamics in dyads and triads. Like Elder (1996), Simmel proposed a relational view of the social world. The social dimension primarily exists *between* individuals, rather than in or outside them. Simmel explored the basic forms of social dynamics through an analysis of dyads and triads. Dyads are the simplest social units into which all social relations, such as the step relationship, can be divided. More than other relationships, dyadic relationships have a potential to be intimate and personal.

It is through the addition of a third person that social dynamics in their full complexity can be observed. The third party may relate to the other two in the triad in different "ideal typical" ways: as a *mediator* who supports the dyadic relationship, for example by uniting them in a common project, or by providing a link between them, or by furnishing a common enemy. Alternatively, as a *neutral arbitrator* who manages dyadic conflicts by acting as an impartial spectator or referee in relation to the other parties. Or, finally, as a *challenger* who undermines the dyadic relationship for his or her own gain. An investigation into intergenerational step relationships therefore has to consider important third-party relationships that may impact the integrity and quality of the relationship.

Although Simmel (1908) primarily focused on social micro dynamics he included supra-individual social entities as forms that affect social interaction. Marriage, the family, and male and female gender roles are examples of such social forms that can have an imprint on individual and collective agency. Simmel's theorizing on social dynamics does not focus on the family in particular, but is well adapted for our purposes. In the following we use his discussion to illustrate how third parties affect cohesion in step relationships over time.

A common argument in recent modern family theory has been that family relationships have been individualized (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002), democratized (Giddens 1992) and deinstitutionalized (Cherlin 2004). Rather than being the result of an externally imposed form they are products of individual negotiation. However, from the relational perspectives above it is apparent that family relationships are many times the product of negotiations that the individual has not participated in him or herself, sometimes within the structuring parameters of supra-individual social forms such as marriage and gender roles. This relational view is also very much in line with current criticisms (Jamieson 1999; Smart & Neale 1999; Smart 2007) of theorists of late modernity, such as Giddens and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, for putting too much stress on individuals' ability to freely shape their relationships. For example, having a child in common makes a clean break with an ex-partner very difficult, as will be demonstrated below.

The interdependence of dyadic relationships on third parties is clearly the case in step relationships. From a theoretical standpoint this may be argued to be the case for all human relationships. However, the empirically generated insight that we wish to convey here is that of a qualitative difference between biological parent–child relationships and step relationships. In contrast to the biological relationship that is based on a direct biological and juridical link, and which the interviewees in our study described primarily in direct personal/dyadic terms, the step relationship was often recalled by our interviewees in a third-party context and, as our results show, tends to remain dependent on third-party relationships for its existence and development over the life course.

Method

This article is based on an explorative study about the preconditions for cohesion in long-term intergenerational step relationships in ageing stepfamilies. The study was financed by Forte, the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (2014/0395), and vetted and approved by the Regional Ethical Committee in Uppsala (Dnr 2015/235).

For the study, retrospective interviews on long-term parent–child step relationships were conducted. To make visible the distinctive features of the step relationship, a systematic comparison with biological relationships was strived for. For this reason, the sample was purposefully structured to include only older parents who had raised *both* biological children and stepchildren. Although the biological relationships are an important part of the data and analysis, the focus of the presentation is on the relationship between the older step-parent and their adult stepchild.

Participants were recruited between autumn 2015 and spring 2017. The recruitment strategy included advertisements in retirement magazines, local radio for retirees, organizations for retirees and for step-parents, Internet forums on family issues, Facebook ads, and contacts through colleagues and students.

Table 1. Sample descriptives.

Interviewees (IPs)	Age, years	Gender	Relationship to stepchild's biological parent	Duration, marital/non-marital cohabitation with step-child's parent, years	N of residential stepchildren*	N of non-residential stepchildren*	Age of step-children at step relationship establishment, years	Age of step-children today, years	N of residential biological children*	N of non-residential biological children*	N of bridge children**
IP 1	79	Female	Widowed	32	1	1†	15; 18	55; 58	1	1	0
IP 2	71	Female	Divorced†	8	0	2	7; 11	52; 56	2	0	1
IP 3	70	Female	Divorced	9	0	2	4; 6	42; 44	1	2	1
IP 4	71	Male	Divorced	9	0	2	6; 9	34; 37	1	2	1
IP 5	72	Male	Married	40	2	1	12; 15	51; 54	2	0	0
IP 6	72	Female	Married	40	1	0	13	51	2	0	0
IP 7	76	Female	Married	38	1	2	2; 6; 10	41; 45; 49	3	0	1
IP 8	74	Male	Married	38	2	0	14; 16	52; 54	1	2	1
IP 9	66	Female	Married	32	0	2	7; 10	39; 42	2	0	2
IP 10	67	Male	Divorced	13	2	0	13; 16	26; 29	3	0	0
IP 11	74	Female	Married	44	3	0	1; 9; 13	50; 53; 55	2	0	0
IP 12	73	Female	Married	33	1	2	8; 13; 15	42; 47; 50	2	0	0
IP 13	78	Male	Divorced	10	1	0	6	45	1	0	1

IP = interviewed person.

†Deceased.

*Refers to earlier stages of life when children were still living with parents.

**Children common to the two parents in the restructured family.

The sample (see Table 1) on which this article is based consisted of 13 parents (eight women, five men) aged 66–79 (mean age 72.5) years who had raised both biological children and stepchildren. Altogether the participants had 59 children (31 biological; 28 step), 97 grandchildren (62 biological; 35 step) and 28 current and former partners. That is, all in all the sample included 184 family *relationships*. In total the participants had shared their restructured household with 34 children (20 biological; 14 step), and

not at all shared the household with 25 children (eleven biological; 14 step). The described step relationships had, with one exception (13 years), a duration of 28–45 years.

In addition to the older participants who are the focus of this article the sample consisted of an additional eleven adult stepchildren who had been raised by both biological and step-parents. Their data (not reported here) support the results below but add an additional level of conceptual complexity (all the presented third-party relationships are the same but have different names from a child's perspective). In order to keep the presentation reasonably transparent we have chosen to focus only on the voices of the older step-parents. A more in-depth presentation of the data set, including the adult stepchildren, can be found in Bildtgård & Öberg (2020).

Extensive individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews (mean length 84 minutes) were conducted and digitally recorded by the authors and transcribed in full. In order to capture the development of the step relationship over time we retrospectively asked the older parents about their family history from early adulthood onwards (including the birth of biological children; initiation of the relationship with their stepchildren; duration of the relationship; organization of parenthood, etc.), their relationship with their biological children and their stepchildren (e.g. whether they considered their stepchildren as their children and how they believed their stepchildren perceived their relationship) and the relationship between the children (siblings, half-siblings, step-siblings). Following the model of intergenerational solidarity (Bengtson & Roberts 1991; Bengtson 2001) we asked about contact frequency, emotional closeness, help and support, and familial obligations, for each respective child. The interview closed with questions about the future of their relationships with their stepchildren and biological children. In all questions the intention was to capture the distinctive feature of the step relationship through systematic comparison with its biological counterpart, without setting the latter as a normative reference point.

A first step in the analysis was to create a set of case descriptions that included, for each participant: a life-course timeline, detailing central transitions; a genogram including all described family members; a comprehensive summary of the interview; the full interview transcript; and, finally, condensed descriptions of each of the 13 interviewees' significant family relationships (184 in total, see above).

The second step of the analysis, following the principles of analytical induction (Znaniecki 1969[1934]; Öberg 1997; Plummer 2001; Denzin 2009), was to generate hypotheses from the case descriptions. The goal was to turn the insights of the individual case descriptions into meaningful knowledge for family gerontology. Analytical induction was used to induce hypotheses from single case descriptions, continuously revising these hypotheses with every new case until no negative evidence was found in the data, that is until the stated hypotheses were supported by the whole data set. The authors read the case descriptions individually, and then formulated and reformulated the hypotheses together. The process continued until consensual validation of the hypotheses was reached.

The analysis started by considering the case descriptions in terms of the study's overarching question: What are the preconditions for cohesion in long-term step re-

lationships, in comparison with biological relationships? The core proposition of this article, that mediating relationships are a central mechanism for cohesion in intergenerational step relationships over time, was based on a discovery that was generated step by step using the described principles of analytical induction. The first case generated the insight that the cohesion of the step relationship under scrutiny was negatively affected by two major life transitions involving third parties – the death of the interviewee's husband and the stepson's separation from his cohabiting partner.

The second case described how the bond between the female interviewee and her stepson had been strengthened through another third party – her newborn daughter, who became the stepson's half-sibling. Further interviewees mentioned other significant third parties and confirmed the importance of the already identified ones. This process continued until the final hypothesis was reformulated, as follows: The cohesion of the step relationship is dependent on significant third parties for its long-term development (generically illustrated in Figure 1). This gave rise to the core concept of *Third-Party Mediating Relationships*, which highlights a central precondition behind the development of and changes in step relationships over time. Four such third-party relationships of significance for cohesion in the step relationship were identified through systematic analysis, involving: (1) the intimate partner; (2) the non-residential parent; (3) the bridge child; and (4) the stepchild-in-law. These relationships vary in importance over the life course, as will be discussed below.

Each identified third party implies two mediating relationships (R1 and R2), as illustrated in Figure 1. These were emphasized differently by the interviewees and the presentation below reflects how they are represented in the empirical data. Sometimes the interviewees would mainly focus on their own personal relationship with the third party; at other times the relationship between the stepchild and the third party would be in focus. If either of these relationships was poor it was likely to have negatively affected the relationship between the step-parent and the child.

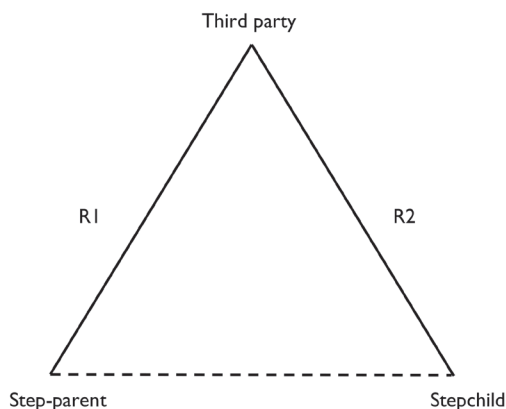


Figure 1. Generic representation of the third party-mediated relationship in intergenerational step relationships. R1 = relationship 1; R2 = relationship 2.

Below we present our findings with a focus on the identified third-party mediating relationships that shape the step relationship over the life course. The thematic presentation takes the older step-parent's, that is the interviewee's, perspective. Information about the interviewees is given in parenthesis after the quotations, including: the interviewed person (IP)'s number, gender (M for men, W for women) and age, followed by relevant relationship information depending on the theme (e.g. "IP10, M67, divorced from stepchildren's parent").

The intimate partner

A step relationship is always initiated through an intimate relationship between the step-parent and one of the biological parents of the child. In terms of Simmel's discussion of dyads and triads (1908), the biological parent mediates the relationship, directly influencing its development. Without this mediation, the step dyad would not exist. In an example from Simmel, the biological child connects the parents and becomes a common "project" that fulfils the intimate relationship. However, in our case of the stepfamily it is the biological parent who connects the other two persons and brings them together. This makes the step relationship qualitatively different from a biological family relationship, where a direct dyadic link exists between parent and child regardless of the relationship between the biological parents, and where this relationship is regulated and supported by the law. A consequence of its mediated characteristic is that although it is possible for the step relationship to achieve a certain level of independence (cf. Schmeeckle, Giarrusso, Feng *et al.* 2006), it is unlikely for the relationship to ever become fully independent of the biological parent.

Below we discuss a number of consequences of this dependence for the development of the relationship over time, based on our data: Initiation of the step relationship; Dependence on the quality of the biological parent–child relationship; Consequences in the event of the dissolution of the intimate union through separation, divorce or widowhood.

Initiation of the step relationship

The strength of the step relationship in later life is dependent on its formative years, in our data often 30–40 years previously in the life course. In the new family the biological parent becomes a mediating link and an arbitrator (cf. Simmel 1908) between the child and the step-parent. In order for a step relationship to develop, the biological parent has to allow and encourage the partner's step-parental involvement and determine its extent. Few formal or informal rules shape the step-parental role (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Cherlin 2004) – instead, the role has to be negotiated and agreed upon. According to our interviewees (born between 1937 and 1950), such agreements had often been reached implicitly and tended to follow a traditionally gendered script, where women were expected to assume an active role as stepmothers while men assumed a more detached parental role, helping out with hobbies or presenting male role models. Gendered expectations seemed to support the stepmother role but not necessarily the stepfather role. None of the women recalled having been challenged by

their partner for assuming an active parental role, but some of the stepfathers did (see also Weaver & Coleman 2010). One stepfather described his partner's ambivalence to him acting as a parent towards her teenage daughters.

The girls' mother wanted me to put my foot down when necessary. You know, everyday things like towels on the floor, and such. And I didn't mind. If you live together then you have a right to react. So I told the girls off a few times, but then what happened was their mother turned against me and said, "You don't need to meddle in this." So I decided I wouldn't, because it got awkward. And I settled for just being a pal. (IP10, M67, divorced from stepchildren's parent)

As he was not the biological parent of the girls this interviewee felt he could not insist, and in the end he settled for being a friend to his stepdaughters. Stories like this illustrate how step relationships are determined and shaped by the intimate partner – in this case, the mother and biological parent – who mediates the relationship and acts as a gatekeeper for the step-parent. Without the consent and encouragement from the biological parent a close step relationship between the child and the step-parent is unlikely to develop.

Dependence on the quality of the biological parent–child relationship

Because the step-parent–child relationship is dependent on the step-parent's relationship with the intimate partner, it is also dependent on the relationship that the partner has with their biological children (see also Klaus, Nauck & Steinbach 2012). If it is a close and loving relationship the step-parent can often piggy-back on the parental bond, but if the relationship between the biological parent and the child is poor, it can become difficult for the step-parent to establish a close relationship with the child.

Since the step relationship is dependent on the biological parent–child relationship, it can also suffer if that relationship changes over time or is severed. For example, a male interviewee recalled how his stepdaughter – with whom he used to have a very close relationship when she was a minor – in midlife chose to sever all ties with her biological mother. As a consequence, he was also excluded from any contact with the stepdaughter. The episode highlights the links of interdependency that run through the partner to the stepchild. As a secondary consequence of the severed contact between the biological mother and her daughter the interviewee had also lost all contact with his step-granddaughter. As an adult the step-granddaughter chose to reconnect with her grandparents but their relationship continued to be constrained by her mother in the middle generation.

Laila [the step-granddaughter] was caught in the conflict. But she spent a lot of time with us when she was a kid, especially after her mother separated [from her father]. She more or less grew up with us. Our relation was strained for a while because she didn't know what to do – she didn't want to agitate her mother and she didn't want to hurt us. [...] Laila had to choose between us and her. (IP5, M72, married to stepchild's parent)

The episode illustrates the analytical point that the step-parental role remains dependent on the biological parent–child relationship, and this link extends to contacts with grandchildren. Using Simmel's (1908) words, this episode shows a failure on the part of the mediator to link the dyad together. Consequently, in cases where the biological parent–child relationship is good, the step-parent can be aided by the child's loyalty towards their biological parent. In cases where the relationship is strained it is instead likely to taint also the step relationship.

Consequences in the event of the dissolution of the intimate union through separation or divorce

Because the relationship between step-parents and stepchildren is mediated by the biological parent, parental separation can have fundamental consequences for the step relationship (see also Coleman, Ganong, Russell *et al.* 2015). If step-parents get on well with their ex-partners post-separation, relationships between them and their stepchildren are more likely to remain close. For example, a female interviewee who retained a very close relationship with her former husband post-divorce related how her ex-husband continued to take care of her son (his stepson) on weekends also after their divorce, and how that relationship was strengthened over the years as the son grew older and came to share more interests with his stepfather (e.g. watching sports or going out for a beer together). She also described how her own relationship with his children (her stepchildren) remained close, despite the divorce.

However, not all separations are benevolent and relationships with stepchildren are easily severed or seriously damaged when the parental relationship ends. A separation can cause a conflict of loyalties for the child which the step-parent has little chance to win. One interviewee recalled how the relationship with his stepdaughters was severed when he divorced his wife.

Our relationship changed completely after I divorced their mother. We divorced on my initiative. I think they were disappointed in me, actually. We have met briefly a few times since then but haven't really talked. [Interviewer: Did you have more contact before the divorce?] Yes, we had. Not every day perhaps, but they kept coming to see their mother and me for holidays and they phoned regularly. (IP10, M67, divorced from stepchildren's parent)

In conclusion, the fate of step relationships after divorce or separation tends to continue to depend on the relationship between the former intimate partners, also in later life. In our data, when intergenerational step relationships remained strong after the dissolution of the parental union, it was always because the former partners in the couple, the biological parent and the step-parent, maintained the relationship.

Consequences of widowhood

In contrast to divorce, death does not imply that the union has been wilfully ended. It therefore raises no conflicts of loyalty that negatively affect the step relationship. A

continued step relationship may instead signal loyalty to the dead biological parent, who died while still in a union with the step-parent.

Some widowed interviewees described that their relationships with their stepchildren remained close. For example, one woman described how her stepfamily continued to meet for holidays and important occasions every year even though her husband was dead. All the people linked to the former husband, including three ex-wives, their children, grandchildren and new partners, got together.

We call ourselves a travelling circus company, because there are so many of us when we get together. My former spouse had a new wife and children and grandchildren. We have celebrated every Christmas together and last year was the first time that he was no longer with us. [...] This year we will all celebrate together again. (IP2, W71, first divorced and later “widowed” from her stepchildren’s parent)

However, even if a step-parent has had a very close relationship with his or her stepchildren, the death of the partner can have a dissolving effect on that relationship, simply because the central mediating relationship that was linking them together is dissolved, diminishing cohesion. This was, for example, the case for a female interviewee who had previously had a very close relationship with her stepson but who saw less of him after being widowed from his father.

My stepson has his own life and that’s become even more pronounced after his father died. We hug and we are close but he has his own life. He sees me as his mother and he comes around to see me, but we don’t have a genuinely close contact. (IP1, W79, widowed from stepchild’s parent)

The aim in this section has been to lift the importance of the intimate partner as a mediating relationship that links the step-parent and their stepchild together and shapes the relationship over the life course. Our argument has been that it is hard to conceive of a step relationship without the inclusion of the intimate partner, and that the intimate partner continues to be a central mediator, shaping the step relationship throughout life.

The non-residential parent

A second “third party” affecting the step-parent–child relationship is the non-residential parent. In the generation that our interviewees belong to (born between 1937 and 1950), this is most often a non-custodial parent (in Sweden, joint custody became the juridical norm in 1998). In contrast to the residential parent, the non-residential parent does not directly connect the step-parent with the child, but can be very important in shaping the relationship depending on the approach he or she has chosen to take in relation to the child and the step-parent. This parent affects the relationship as a party

who is often involved in negotiations regarding the child (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Put in Simmel's terms, a third-party non-residential parent who chooses to *challenge* the step relationship can make it difficult to achieve a close step-parent–child connection.

In our study we identified three ways in which the non-residential parent can affect the step-parental relationship – through challenge, cooperation or absence, as described below. This is true in particular in the beginning of the step relationship, before agreements have been made and things have settled, but it may have a lasting effect on the development of this relationship over the life course. Non-residential parents can also have an important influence on the step relationship after the child grows up and leaves their childhood home.

Challenge

In Simmel's argument, one of the ways in which a third party can affect the dyadic relationship is by challenging it. In our data, the most problematic scenario for the early step relationship was when the non-residential parent challenged the step-parent. Some of the female interviewees recalled having been challenged by jealous mothers who accused them of stealing their husbands and children. In one example a woman married a man who brought his son into their new family. The biological mother could not accept this arrangement and started calling late night with threats and accusations. Another female interviewee described how her abusive ex-husband had scared off one of her intimate partners by threatening him with a shotgun. Although her current husband did not scare as easily, the ex-husband continued to challenge the step relationship until he died a few years later.

A particular form of third-party challenge involves taking sides to break up the dyad. A non-residential parent could challenge the step relationship by vilifying the step-parent in front of the child, or by presenting a competing role model. One stepfather remembered how the biological father, who had a drug addiction and was absent in his son's everyday life, episodically appeared, playing the role of a more playful and exciting father figure, challenging his own efforts to present a positive role model to his stepson.

At the beginning our relationship was far from perfect. He [the stepson] kept on comparing! Because I worked a lot to keep us afloat and I suppose he wanted a bit more glamour. When his father was sober he took him to football and hockey games. Almost like bribes. And then he [the stepson] looked up to him. (IP5, M72, formerly residential step-parent)

As a consequence, the interviewee had a hard time to connect with his stepson. Only a few years later, when the father died from alcohol abuse, did the stepfather manage to achieve a closer relationship with his stepson.

Non-residential parents could therefore make step-parenthood difficult by opposing themselves to step-parents assuming a parental role, or by presenting a competing

role model. However, they did not necessarily succeed in challenging the bond in the long run. In all the stories above, because of their respective personal problems, the non-residential parents became increasingly absent parents and their impact on the step relationship diminished. Or, more commonly, over time they adapted to the new situation and started cooperating.

Cooperation

Not all non-residential parents challenge step relationships. Some non-residential parents instead act as mediators, cooperating around the common task of raising the child. As stepfamilies have become more common and shared custody arrangements have increasingly become the norm in Sweden and other Western countries, cooperation between biological parents and step-parents, inside and outside of the child's home, has become increasingly necessary (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002) and the focus of empirical research (see, e.g., Marsiglio & Hinojosa 2007; Klaus, Nauck & Steinbach 2012). Shared custody was not the norm for the studied generation but most of our participants had still had cooperative relationships with their stepchildren's non-residential parent, sometimes after an initial period of negotiation on the extent and boundaries of their parental role. In these arrangements the non-residential parent seems to have concluded that cooperation around the step relationship was for the benefit of themselves, their children and their mutual relationship.

For example, one interviewee described how, after first having challenged the biological mother about the stepson's dress code and reading habits, she later developed a close cooperative relationship with the non-residential mother. Another interviewee described how after a while he got to know his stepdaughter's biological father who lived abroad, and how they cooperated around her interest in sailing:

Sally went to Germany, where her dad lived, or he came over here, every three months or so. So I got to know him – very nice guy – we got on very well. I bought an old van and turned it into a mobile home and we travelled down to Germany and visited Sally's dad and we made great contact. [...] She was into sailing so she bought a boat, and I helped out a lot, which she appreciated. I had my mobile home and it could pull a trailer so I toured the country with four girls and a boat, visiting boat racing competitions. And Sally's father joined us and he even paid for a boat. (IP13, M78, formerly residential step-parent)

Some of the interviewees recalled having thought a lot about what their parental role should be in relation to their stepchildren when a parent outside of the household existed. In the interviews this ambivalence was clearly marked by recurrent phrases such as "They already had a father", "There was already a mother", "I've never tried to be their father". However, in reality these interviewees often appear to have played a fairly substantial parental role in the lives of their stepchildren, and therefore the above phrases did not seem to describe their concrete parental efforts as much as showing a kind of verbal respect in relation to the biological parent – a boundary that

the interviewees did not seem to want to cross. To some extent, they seemed to act as “allies” to the biological parents (Marsiglio & Hinojosa 2007) with regard to their parental rights, although they took on active parental responsibility.

I've never tried to become their dad. [...] Perhaps I became a father figure for Anders [stepson]. I think he got more stability in his life than before and he appreciated it. [Interviewer: But you said you never tried to be their father?] I never tried to replace their daddy because they already had one. But they were our children. They had no other life besides this family so of course this was their family. The family sticks together. [Interviewer: Do you think they would refer to you as their dad?] Yes, they would, they would. (IP8, M74, formerly residential step-parent)

All the above examples show a degree of cooperation taking place between the step-parent and the non-residential parent. Cooperation with and sensitivity to the parent outside of the household is an example of how that non-residential parent impacts on the step-parent's relationship with their stepchildren and on their step-parental role.

Absence

A third scenario that was described in the interviews was that the parent outside of the household was absent. An absent or uninvolved parent could make it easier to shoulder the role of step-parent, not only because this was then not challenged but also because the step-parent did not have to consider a competing, biological parent. Sometimes the non-residential parent had never been part of the stepfamily equation, because that person had transitioned out of the child's life at an earlier stage; for example, they had emigrated or passed away. However, often the non-residential parent would be present in the beginning of the step relationship but gradually fade away. This was the case with some of the non-residential parents described above. They started off by challenging the step-parent's relationship, but later, alcohol or drug addiction corroded their abilities to fight for the relationship with their child, or they gave up and turned to a new family project. In any case, the transitioning out of the child's life by such a parent could facilitate the development of a bond between the step-parent and the child. This was the case for one interviewee who, as soon as their father passed away, adopted his stepchildren.

In this section we have shown how the step relationship is affected by a third party: non-residential parents. Through the way they interacted with their child and the step-parent – challenging, mediating or remaining absent/neutral – they contributed to shaping the step relationship. The relationship between the two biological parents, the ex-partners, and their model for co-parenting after divorce was often pivotal to this arrangement.

Conflicts surrounding the extent of the step-parent's involvement were often settled quite early in the relationship but this settlement was not definitive, as is evident from our family history interviews. For example, the dynamics between parents could

change if the child switched custodial parents or left the nest and thus became a child outside the step-parent's household. It was not uncommon for children to explore their relationship with the non-residential parent when they became independent adults, and to re-evaluate their relationship with their step-parent. In later life the non-residential parent no longer had any direct impact on the step relationship, but the consequences of earlier conflicts or cooperation could be evident in the quality and stability of the relationship between adult children and their older step-parents.

The bridge child

A third mediating relationship is what we have chosen to call a "bridge child": a common child of the two parents in the restructured family. Again, referring to Simmel (1908), we can make a distinction between the addition of children in stepfamilies versus biological families. Simmel argues that the step from no child to one child makes a huge difference to family dynamics in the biological family, but that a second child makes a relatively small difference. However, a second child to both parents in a restructured family creates a different dynamic. The new child will be related in blood to both the step-parent (the new child's biological parent) and the step-parent's stepchild (the new child's half-sibling). Following Simmel's categorization of third-party dynamics, such a child could constitute a mediator who strengthens cohesion in the step relationship, by constituting a biological link between the step-parent and the older child, and by being a common project (child/sibling) for both of them. The idea that a bridge child would unite a family has been proposed, but also questioned, in previous research (Stewart 2005b; Ganong & Coleman 2017). A bridge child can logically create a structurally more stable relationship between a step-parent and their stepchild by providing a legally sanctioned biological link between all family members which lends external recognition to the relationship. However, the bridge child can also create family friction.

In our data, all the interviewees who had bridge children, with the exception of one, still had close contacts with their stepchildren in later life. The bridge child seemed to have given stability to step dyads over time, because he or she added a link between the stepchild and their step-parent that was independent of the intimate partner, and that was structurally less fragile as it was not likely to come to an end through divorce or widowhood in the parental couple. The interviewees themselves intuitively pointed to the bridge child as a unifying factor. One woman expressed how the different groups in her restructured family were united by a common child.

My new husband had to conquer the house and embrace the children in order to be included in our group. He had his own group with his son John. They had lived together all of their lives. And then his daughters [who lived with their mother] visited. They became a group, the old family. And I and my children were the other old family. And my husband and me, we were also a group, so to speak. But then our daughter Linda was born. God, what a wonderful family we became.

[...] Everybody assembled around her and loved her – and my stepdaughters wanted to come and visit. And my stepson John, he loved the little girl that he could help take care of. She was the puzzle piece that brought all our groups together. (IP7, W76, married to bridge child's father)

Another interviewee described the strong bond that was formed between her own biological son and her two stepsons when they were united through a bridge child: her youngest son. She described how the brothers freely chose to split the inheritance from her ex-husband between them, although her oldest son was not his legal heir (Swedish law would not alone have awarded him an inheritance, without a legally binding will). The strong bond between the brothers also contributed to her continuing contact with her stepsons after her husband passed away.

However, a bridge child can also challenge (using Simmel's terms) the step relationship, if he or she introduces sibling rivalry and feelings of resentment among step children and biological children over unequal treatment. For example, some studies have found that a bridge child can cause jealousy and make stepchildren feel like outsiders in their parents' new family project (Stewart 2005b). This was not expressed in our interviews with older step-parents, but it was mentioned by some of the adult stepchild interviewees, so it is possibly a question of generational perspective, where parents are more likely to downplay sibling rivalry in their explanations of family cohesion. Divisive sibling dynamics can also be awakened in adult life if there is competition around parental attention for (grand)children – a common concern aired by adult stepchildren (see Bildtgård & Öberg 2020).

In conclusion, a child common to the biological parent and the step-parent can affect cohesion in the step relationship, by linking the different members of the step-family through a shared blood bond, by becoming a unifying collective project, or, on the other hand, by potentially challenging the step dyad by competing with the stepchild for parental attention.

The stepchild-in-law

The last mediating relationship we identified is that involving stepchildren-in-law. Step relationships, especially later in the life course when the stepchildren have grown up and moved out, are clearly shaped by the partners of the stepchildren: the in-laws. This is arguably true also for relationships with biological children, but if step relationships are more fragile than their biological counterparts, the partners of stepchildren may be more decisive for the continuing development of relationships with older step-parents. For example, the stepchildren-in-law might influence how often the step-parents are invited to family occasions or are allowed to see their step-grandchildren. Two aspects of the relationship with stepchildren-in-law figure in our data: stepchildren-in-law either as kinkeepers, acting as *mediators* in Simmel's (1908) sense of the term, linking the two generations together – or as gatekeepers, in Simmel's sense *challenging* the step relationship and keeping the generations apart.

Stepchildren-in-law were often described by interviewees as important kinkeepers who maintained the connection between step-parents and their adult stepchildren. A female interviewee described how the relationship with her stepson was much closer when he was cohabiting with a woman (the stepchild-in-law) who stayed in contact with the interviewee and encouraged her stepson to attend family occasions. The bond between the interviewee and her stepson became weaker after his separation from this partner.

My stepson had a long cohabiting relationship with a woman and during that time we had a lot more contact. But since they broke up I don't see him as much. Before they broke up he was just like my [biological] daughters – we socialized a lot more [as a family]. But now he lives alone and is a lot more reserved. [...] He doesn't come to family occasions any more. (IP1, W79, parent to a single stepson)

One aspect of family relationships is the “matrifocal tilt” of linked lives (see, e.g., Hess Brown & DeRycke 2010): in many couples, women tend to take on the responsibility for building and tending social contacts. Family networks are often created and upheld by female family members and family gatherings are often organized by women. Many of the female interviewees emphasized the importance of the relationship between them, as mothers, and their stepdaughters-in-law. This was not specifically a feature of the step relationship, but rather of the mother–daughter-in-law relationship in general. Men were perceived more as detached atoms that needed to bond with a partner in order to integrate into a family molecule. Strong mother–daughter-in-law bonds were often described as a recipe for family cohesion.

Luckily, I have a good relation with my stepdaughters-in-law. Not everybody likes their mothers-in-law. My oldest stepson – his wife and I are in very close contact. That's also true for my youngest [biological] son. For my oldest stepson and my youngest son, it's their wives primarily that I'm in close contact with. So if one of the wives says, “Have you called your mother?”, my sons will say, “But I don't need to, I hear everything from you.” (IP2, W71, parent to two married stepsons)

The importance of good relationships with stepdaughters-in-law was a theme in many of our interviews with older female interviewees. A good relationship with the partners of the stepsons supported the relationship with the stepsons as they grew older. On the other hand, if the relationship with the stepdaughter-in-law was strained, she could instead become a gatekeeper who kept the old step-parent and adult stepson apart and undermined their relationship. An older woman illustrated this when she compared her relationship with the wives of two of her stepsons.

I'm almost closer to Richard's wife than I am to him, because as women you almost automatically understand each other. The fact is, they [the stepchildren] chose somebody, and they do so at their own liking, but sometimes you can

become very close to the person they have chosen. By contrast, Ralf's wife [the interviewee's second stepdaughter-in-law], she's not much for staying in touch. I think she's been appointed to keep the contacts in her own family. They are five sisters and very close, so she hasn't got any time for others outside of their family circle. She never calls. (IP11, W74, parent to two married stepsons and a stepdaughter)

As a consequence of her weaker relationship with her stepson Ralf's wife, this interviewee had much less contact with Ralf and also met her step-grandchildren on his side a lot less. In this case the stepdaughter-in-law acted as a gatekeeper.

The examples above show the special importance that the female interviewees assigned to the relationship with stepdaughters-in-law for maintaining contact with their stepsons. When such a bond was missing, because the stepson did not have a female partner or because the step-parent did not get along with her, it could have negative consequences for the intergenerational relationship. By contrast, the relationship with stepdaughters generally seemed less dependent on the step-parents' relationship with their stepsons-in-law, probably because stepdaughters stayed in contact themselves. When stepsons-in-law were mentioned, it was only as gatekeepers who, sometimes forcefully, kept the generations apart in order to monopolize access to the adult stepdaughter.

In this last section we have demonstrated how cohesion in step relationships is affected by stepchildren-in-law, and how these can either help integrate children with their step-parents or, conversely, hinder contact. These mediating relationships become especially important for the development of step relationships in the later part of the life course, when stepchildren have become adults and have formed families of their own. In this study, as an additional consequence, these mediating relationships affected the interviewees' access to step-grandchildren. In most cases it was the female interviewees who described their special relationship with stepdaughters-in-law. None of our male interviewees brought this up. The reason for this seems to be that their contacts with stepchildren-in-law are often mediated by their wives.

Discussion

The purpose of this article has been to investigate the preconditions for cohesion in long-term intergenerational step relationships. A central finding was that the step relationship is essentially a *mediated relationship*, and that cohesion in the step dyad over the life course and into later life cannot be fully understood without this insight.

Above we have identified and described four third-party relationships that mediate the step relationship, involving: (1) the intimate partner; (2) the non-residential parent; (3) the bridge child; and (4) the stepchild-in-law. Other relationships can of course be central to the step relationship, but these were the ones we identified in our interviews and the ones we have chosen to focus on in the interest of analytical parsimony.

A fifth third-party mediating relationship deserves to be parenthetically mentioned

because it was often emphasized by the adult children in the data set: grandchildren. In the interviews, adult stepchildren recurrently mentioned that the interest their step-parents took in the third generation, their step-grandchildren, was important for their own relationship with their step-parents. If a step-parent involved him or herself in the step-grandchild this strengthened the step-parent–child dyad, but if they didn't it was interpreted as an indication that the bond had never been strong.

Simmel's discussion of dyads and triads (1908) is helpful for highlighting dynamics in step and biological parent–child relationships. From this perspective a basic distinction is how the biological child and the stepchild are connected to the parents. The biological child is a product of the relationship between his or her two parents and has a primary dyadic relationship with each of the parents, which is supported by law and is therefore structurally stable over the life course, regardless of the quality of the parental relationship. By contrast, the stepchild is essentially a mediated relationship with little support from a legal framework. All rights and obligations of the step-parent are mediated by the biological parent. If the step-parent's relationship with the child's biological parent is broken there is little to guarantee its continuation and it is open to dissolution at any moment over the life course. This can be contrasted to the non-residential, separated biological parent. His or her parental status is normally respected, at least formally. This was demonstrated in the section on "The non-residential parent". Although the relationship can vary in quality it remains structurally intact over the life course.

The way that siblings are connected to their parents also differs. In the biological family a new, higher order child is not differently linked to the parents than the first child. The siblings' family situation is structurally similar (although this does not preclude sibling rivalry). By contrast, in the restructured family a bridge child will be directly linked to both his or her parents while a stepchild shares only one of them. This introduces a different kind of dynamics. The new child can serve as a mediator for the step relationship, linking the step-parent and stepchildren together through a blood bond, or he or she can – even if we found no evidence for this in our sample – challenge it by using his or her status to introduce fractions in the family. Sibling love or rivalry may continue to play a central role in the development of the step relationship over the life course.

Finally, stepchildren-in-law are not differently connected to the step-parent–child dyad than children-in-law are to the biological parent–child dyad. However, because of the weaker stability of the step compared with the biological relationship, the role of stepchildren-in-law may be more important for its cohesion, especially in later life and particularly if the biological parent has passed away.

One reason for the importance of mediating relationships is that the step relationship is not regulated by law. This makes it inherently fragile and essentially different from the biological intergenerational relationship, which cannot be legally severed, even if it is dysfunctional. For example, Swedish law does not allow parents to disinherit their biological children. Stepchildren, by contrast, have no right to inheritance without the existence of a written, legally binding will. While the biological parent–

child relationship is therefore protected and guided by what Simmel would refer to as a “strong supra-individual framework”, the step relationship exists in a legal no man’s land and is essentially a negotiated relationship. In this sense it can be said to exemplify the modern, deinstitutionalized family where relationships between partners, parents, children and siblings are negotiable and negotiated (Giddens 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Cherlin 2004).

However, as we have emphasized above, rather than the step relationship primarily being the result of negotiations between the step-parent and the child, it is a product of negotiations in relation to third parties. Also, although not guided by a legal framework, it is clear that these negotiations are not free from the guidance of supra-individual social forms such as the nuclear family and gender relations. The importance of gendered expectations on family roles was particularly evident in relation to the roles stepmothers and stepfathers in the examined generation were allowed, and expected, to take in relation to their stepchildren, and the roles that stepdaughters-in-law played in upholding the relationship between older stepmothers and adult stepsons. To say, then, that step relationships are essentially negotiated relationships is not the same as saying that these negotiations are free and unguided. It is a negotiation not between unrestrained individuals, but between individuals deeply enmeshed in interpersonal dependencies and in particular between other members of those close networks.

Our argument in this article has been that third-party relationships are essential for the development of step relationships over time. This makes step relationships qualitatively different from biological parent–child relationships. Our conclusion is that studies of intergenerational relationships in ageing stepfamilies need to consider the special role of third parties in the development of these relationships over time. The step relationship cannot be understood without taking into account these mediating relationships – the step dyad is not enough!

Final critical reflections

This exploratory study is based on a fairly small number of interviews. A larger sample size should arguably not undermine the theoretical logic of our discussion concerning the four central mediating relationships. However, considering the heterogeneity of the studied phenomena, the limited number of interviewees could mean that we have missed other mediating relationships that are important to the long-term stability of intergenerational step relationships. It is also important to note that the design of the study, which required the inclusion only of participants with both stepchildren and biological children, means that our results may not be valid for individuals with only stepchildren (as, e.g., the mediating effect of the bridge child is not relevant to them). Also, the qualitative nature of our study only allows us to state that the presented mediating relationships can play an important role in intergenerational step relationships. It does not allow us to rank their relative importance. Finally, as with all studies that use retrospective data, we need to be aware that interviewees may recall events selectively, and their interpretation of events may be influenced by their current relationships with their stepchildren.

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