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Petren, Raymond E.; Lardier, David T.; Bible, Jacqueline; Bermea, Autumn; and van Eeden-Moorefield, Bradley, "Parental Relationship Stability and Parent-Adult Child Relationships in Stepfamilies: A Test of Alternative Models" (2019). *Department of Family Science and Human Development Scholarship and Creative Works*. 120.

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Parental Relationship Stability and Parent–Adult Child Relationships in Stepfamilies: A Test of Alternative Models

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Stepfamily relationships remain important over the life course to both children and parents. Unfortunately, limitations in availability of longitudinal data that include useful measures of stepfamily relations remain, thereby scholars must rely mostly on cross-sectional examinations. As a way to more rigorously test some of the mixed cross-sectional findings related to the links among stepcouple stability and parent–adult child relationships (closeness, involvement) for three parent–child subsystems (mother–child, father–child, stepparent–child), we used an alternative modeling strategy to test three plausible models. Multiple group analyses also were used to compare associations for stepmother and stepfather families. Stepfamilies ($N = 330$) from the National Survey of Families and Households with data from both adult children and primary respondents (resident parent or stepparent) were included. All three models fit the data. The best-fitting model suggests the most probable order of association is that parental involvement is associated with parent–child closeness which, in turn, is associated with stepcouple stability. Results also suggest that multiple parent–child relationships and stepcouple relationship stability are generally positively linked for both stepmother and stepfather households, although some differences emerged. Taken together, findings underscore the influence of cross-household stepfamily relationships even when children are adults.

Keywords: parent involvement, relationship stability, stepfamilies

Stepfamily relationships have become more common over the past several decades (Guzzo, 2017), and children are increasingly likely to have at least one stepparent by the time they enter adulthood. Some adult children view stepparents as parents, friends, or mentors, whereas others maintain more tenuous or even highly conflictual relationships that can lead to reduced wellbeing for all family members over the life course, increased family instability, and even family estrangement (Ahrons, 2007; Ganong, Coleman, Chapman, & Jamison, 2018). Alternatively, high-quality relationships, including high levels of involvement, with both stepparents and biological/adoptive parents are associated with positive wellbeing among adult children, whom are our focus here

(Lardier, van Eeden-Moorefield, Nacer, Hull, & Browning, 2017). Further, closeness in stepfamily relationships is a primary consideration in obligations of intergenerational support in stepfamilies (Coleman, Ganong, Hans, Sharp, & Rothrauff, 2005; Ganong, Coleman, & Rothrauff, 2009). Given the implications of the nature of stepfamily relationships (Ahrons, 2007; Ganong & Coleman, 2017), there is a need to understand processes in stepfamilies that can explain links between closeness, involvement, and stability among various members of stepfamilies such that efforts can be made to strengthen these relationships and families, thereby supporting the wellbeing of individual family members. Unfortunately, little is known about how family relationships are linked among stepfamilies with adult children (King & Lindstrom, 2016).

Previous research on family relationships among stepfamilies with adult children is limited as studies have typically focused on families with adolescent children (e.g., King, 2006, 2007, 2009) or used adult children's retrospective reports of earlier relationships with family members (e.g., Ahrons, 2007; Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011). One study examined the effects of mother–child and nonresident father–child relationships on stepfather–adult child relationships (e.g., King & Lindstrom, 2016). Although this is valuable research, families comprise multiple subsystems that are mutually linked (Cox & Paley, 1997), and the reciprocal influence of family relationships is likely heightened by the complexity and ambiguity inherent in stepfamily subsystems (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Accordingly, it may be particularly important

This article was published Online First November 29, 2018.

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A previous version of this research was presented at the 2017 Annual Meeting of the National Council on Family Relations in Orlando, Florida.

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to consider the potential for reciprocal influences among family relationships for stepfamilies with adult children, as new parent-child boundaries are established, and adult children have more autonomy to influence levels of involvement and closeness with parents (Feistman, Jamison, Coleman, & Ganong, 2016). The current study examines associations among stepcouple stability and multiple parent-adult child relationships (resident parent, nonresident parent, and stepparent closeness and involvement). Included are families with adult stepchildren who lived with a target resident parent and a stepparent (stepcouple) during adolescence. For simplicity, we refer to biological parents who lived with the child when the child was an adolescent and are part of the stepcouple as "resident parent," "resident father," or "resident mother." Parents who did not live with the child during adolescence and are not part of the focal stepcouple are referred to as "nonresident parent," "nonresident father," or "nonresident mother."

There is limited research on links between relationships in stepfamilies with adult children to guide a single conceptual model and the likelihood of reciprocal associations among stepfamily relationships is great. As a way to enhance the rigor of prior cross-sectional research in spite of the lack of available longitudinal data with necessary measures across waves, a primary focus of this study is to use an alternative models approach (Hoyle, 2012) to explore the most likely pathways of influence between these relationships. The first model suggests stepcouple stability is associated with closeness between each parent (mother, father, stepparent) and the adult child which, in turn, is linked with each parent's involvement with the child. The second model proposes the opposite of the first, suggesting that each parent's involvement is associated with their closeness with the child, which, in turn is associated with stepcouple stability. The third model mirrors the first, except the ordering of closeness and involvement are reversed. This suggests that relationship stability is associated with each parent's involvement which, in turn, is associated with parent-child closeness for each parent-child dyad. Model fit is compared among the three models to determine the most likely pathways of influence among the relationships. If all models fit similarly well, it will be evidence of potential bidirectional effects among family relationships. Relationships generally differ among stepmother and stepfather families (Gunnnoe & Hetherington, 2004; Schmeekle, Giarrusso, Feng, & Bengtson, 2006). Therefore, a second objective of the current study is to examine the moderating role of stepfamily type.

Conceptual Framework Grounded in Family Systems Theory

Family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 1997) suggests that a stepfamily is a singular unit comprised of smaller family units, or subsystems (e.g., parental, stepparent-biological parent, biological parent-child). Multiple subsystems (e.g., stepcouple, parent-child) inside and outside of the family unit influence relationships between individuals (Minuchin, 1974). Each subsystem is both independent and linked to other subsystems through boundaries (Minuchin, 1974). Given that each subsystem is inextricable from others, this creates potential for spillover effects, where problems and successes (e.g., lower involvement and closeness) in any one subsystem are expected to influence family functioning in other

systems (e.g., relationship stability; King & Lindstrom, 2016; Kouros, Papp, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2014) and vice versa.

Transitions in family structure (e.g., parental dissolutions and repartnerings) and development (e.g., movement from adolescence to adulthood) are naturally occurring times for reorganization in family systems (Cox & Paley, 1997). Stepfamilies with adult children represent a unique context in which increased child autonomy and changes in residence result in a different set of conditions for stepfamily relationships, including less parental authority, less contact among children and parents, and fewer or changing child-related concerns for stepcouples. In moving through adolescence into adulthood, children have more choice in the closeness of relationships with their parents (Laurson & Collins, 2009), and they are able to renegotiate relationships with parents outside of the influence of a shared family home, as well as with parents who were nonresident parents during adolescence (Feistman et al., 2016).

Research on family relationships among stepfamilies with adult children is minimal. However, studies examining relationships among stepfamilies with children and adolescents may provide some insight because transitions through developmental stages influence adult experiences (Crosnoe & Johnson, 2011). The existing literature highlights three social and structural attributes of stepfamilies not addressed directly by family systems theory that may differentially influence links among stepmother and stepfather families: biological relatedness, residence, and (step)parent gender (e.g., Ganong et al., 2011; King, 2006, 2007). These distinctions suggest that parents who are biologically related to the child, lived with the child, and are women may have more influence in family relationships (King, 2006, 2007).

Stepcouple Stability and Parent-Child Relationships

Stepparent-child relationships. Stepfamilies are at significant risk for relationship dissolution (Sweeney, 2010; van Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2013), and there are reasons to believe that stable stepcouple relationships will be associated with closer and more involved stepparent-adult child relationships. However, this may differ by gender of the stepparent. Recent research including stepfamilies with young children and adolescents shows that higher marital quality is associated with closer and more positive stepfather-child relationships (Bryant, Futris, Hicks, Lee, & Oshri, 2016; King, 2006). King and Lindstrom (2016) similarly found that young adults were more likely to report becoming close with their stepfathers when their mothers reported higher quality relationships with the stepfathers. However, a similar link was not found between father-stepmother relationship quality and stepmother-adolescent closeness (King, 2007), suggesting that stepmothers may view the couple relationship as less important to their relationships with stepchildren (Fine & Kurdek, 1995). Overall, such findings show a positive link between the stepcouple relationship and the quality of the stepparent-child relationship and suggest that stepcouple stability may be more closely linked with stepparent-child relationships in stepfather families, compared to stepmother families. However, stepfamilies with adult children may differ from families with younger children in previous studies.

When the stepcouple relationship is unstable, it is likely that the couple's resources (time, emotional energy) will be allocated to

their own relationship and not to the child (Osborne & McLanahan, 2007; Sweeney, 2010). This may be particularly relevant when children are adults, and the stepcouple relationship may take precedence as parental involvement is less obligatory. Also, children may avoid parents and stepparents in conflictual relationships (Aquilino, 2006), and this strategy may be implemented by adult children who no longer live in the stepfamily household. Alternatively, when children view the presence of a stepparent as beneficial to their biological parent, they report becoming closer to stepparents (Ganong et al., 2011). To the extent that ongoing involvement with adult children is important to parents, stepcouple relationship stability may be enhanced when parents and stepparents are positively involved with their adult children. However, the direction of association between stepcouple stability and parent–adult child relationships is unclear (Bryant et al., 2016), and these links have not been examined for stepmother families with adult children.

Resident parent–child relationships. Most children live with their mothers after their parents are divorced, and much of the research is on resident mother–stepfather stepfamilies (King, 2007). Limited research has shown that the quality of mother–stepfather relationships is not correlated with the quality of mother–adolescent child relationships (King, Thorsen, & Amato, 2014), and father–stepmother happiness is not associated with father–adolescent closeness (King, 2007). Residential mother–adolescent relationships decline when stepfathers enter the household, though (King, 2009). However, associations among resident parent–child relationships and stepcouple relationships may differ as children become adults. Whereas resident parents are typically obligated to be involved with adolescent children, regardless of the nature of the stepcouple relationship, adult children and parents may choose higher levels of involvement when the parent–stepparent relationship is stable and not conflictual, resulting in satisfying shared family time. The reverse order of association is also possible. Given that relationships with adult children are important to parents (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Ganong et al., 2009), positive parent–child relationships may spill-over into the stepcouple relationship, encouraging stability, or strained parent–child relationships may result in stress for the stepcouple, discouraging stability.

Nonresident parent–child relationships. Research and theory suggest a number of reasons that stepcouple stability and nonresident parent–child relationships may be associated. One view suggests that repartnered resident parents may encourage close and involved nonresident parent–child relationships when the stepcouple relationship is more secure or discourage them when the former spouse’s involvement is a threat to their relationship with the stepparent (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). However, aspects of resident parent relationships are expected to have less influence as a child moves into adulthood. Another view suggests that children may form stronger relationships with nonresident parents when repartnerships of resident parents result in conflict or difficulties in the home (Aquilino, 2006; King, 2006). Given the autonomy of adult children, this perspective may be more plausible. Research shows that adolescents are closer to nonresident fathers when their mothers and stepfathers are less happily married (King, 2006). However, parent gender might be a factor, as a similar association was not found between father–stepmother relationship happiness and nonresident mother involvement (King,

2007). These links have not yet been examined for stepfamilies with adult children.

Associations Among Parent–Child Relationships in Stepfamilies

Resident parent–child and stepparent–child relationships. Research consistently shows that the quality of resident mother–child relationships is positively associated with stepfather–child relationship quality and closeness (e.g., King, 2009; King, Amato, & Lindstrom, 2015; King et al., 2014). Similar links have been found for links between resident father–adolescent closeness and stepmother–adolescent closeness in father–stepmother families (King, 2007). The direction of association between resident parent–child and stepparent–child relationships is not entirely clear. Findings from longitudinal research (King et al., 2014) suggest that mother–adolescent and stepfather–adolescent relationships are mutually influential, although associations in both directions only approached significance, perhaps suggesting that the relationships changed little over the 1-year period between study waves. One study found that children who report greater closeness with the mother in adolescence and those who report becoming closer to the mother from adolescence to young adulthood are more likely to remain close with or become close to their stepfathers from adolescence to early adulthood (King & Lindstrom, 2016). Overall, the extant research suggests a positive association between the quality of resident parent–child relationships and that of stepparent–child relationships. However, no research has examined the concurrent association between parent–child relationships and adult stepparent–child relationship, and it is not clear whether these associations will continue when children are adults and they have had opportunities to develop autonomous relationships with stepparents over time and away from the home shared with the biological parent.

Nonresident parent–child and stepparent–child relationships. Particularly, when parent–child relationships are close, children may experience loyalty conflicts and resist building relationships with stepparents or limit involvement with nonresident parents (Ganong et al., 2011). However, most research shows that aspects of stepfather–child relationships are not associated with nonresident father–child relationships (Jensen & Shafer, 2013; King, 2006; King et al., 2014, 2015). Similarly, one study found no association between stepmother–adolescent closeness and mother–adolescent closeness (King, 2007). Although most of these studies have conceptualized stepparent–child relationships as the outcome, one longitudinal investigation (King, 2009) found that neither fathers’ frequency of contact, nor the level of father–adolescent closeness was changed by the level of stepfather–child closeness. Another longitudinal study (King & Lindstrom, 2016) found a negative association between nonresident father–adolescent relationship quality prior to the stepfather’s entrance and closeness to stepfathers later when the children were in early adulthood. Adult children may choose to invest less in relationships with stepparents when they are satisfied with the relationships they have with nonresident parents, or they may develop closer relationships with stepparents in lieu of close relationships with nonresident parents (Ganong et al., 2018). Alternatively, associations between nonresident parent–child and stepparent–child relationships may be minimized if the increase in autonomy for adult

children and the reduced need for cooperation across mother and father households enable stepchildren to develop independent relationships with each parent (Ganong et al., 2018).

Resident parent–child and nonresident parent–child relationships. Research on the association between resident parent–child relationships and nonresident parent–child relationships in stepfamilies is limited and has focused on stepfamilies with children and adolescents. Dunn, Cheng, O'Connor, and Bridges (2004) found that positivity in mother–child relationships was moderately correlated with positivity in nonresident father–child relationships. Research on father–stepmother stepfamilies showed that neither closeness with the father or the stepmother was associated with mother–adolescent closeness (King, 2007). We note that samples in these studies differed in terms of nationality (i.e., British), child age and development, and stepparent gender. As such, differences in the findings are not easily interpreted. Still, there are reasons to believe that resident parent–child and nonresident parent–child relationships may be linked in stepfamilies with adult children. Some adult children may choose to develop closer relationships with one biological parent, particularly when the relationship with the other biological parent is less close or conflictual (Aquilino, 2006). Alternatively, a close and supportive relationship with one biological parent may foster a sense of harmony and security that spills over into the relationship with the other biological parent.

Method

Sample and Design

Data were from Wave 3 of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), which was collected between 2001 and 2002. The NSFH is a national, representative, longitudinal study conducted from 1987 to 2002 (Sweet & Bumpass, 2002). The Wave 1 sample included 13,007 adults and Wave 3 was a subset of the primary respondents from the original sample and focal children, if present. Of the original sample, 78% completed interviews at Wave 3 ($N = 10,069$). The Wave 3 sample used here included stepfamilies that were either married ($n = 273$) or cohabiting ($n = 57$) and had a focal child living with the primary respondent during

adolescence ($N = 330$). Primary respondents were largely biological parents (78%), with 70% identifying as mothers and 30% as fathers. However, 22% of the primary respondents were stepparents, with 55% identifying as a stepfather and 45% as a stepmother. Primary respondents identified largely as White (92%), followed by 5% identifying as Black and 2% as Hispanic/Latino(a). Over 60% of the primary respondents had a high school diploma, 8% an associate's degree, 4% a bachelor's degree, and 9% had a graduate/professional degree; 15% did not have a high school diploma. The median household income was \$37,000 annually ($SD = \$29,005.08$). Incomes were similar for stepmother ($Mdn = \$35,000$) and stepfather families ($Mdn = \$37,000$). Primary respondents' ages ranged from 34 to 82 years ($M = 48.90$, $SD = 7.04$). Primary respondents identified being in a married or cohabiting stepcouple relationship from one to 60 years ($M = 19.75$, $SD = 16.75$). At Wave 2, primary respondents reported that 34% of nonresident parents were remarried, although this was not recorded at Wave 3 (Sweet & Bumpass, 2002). Focal children were 43% male and 57% female, primarily White (92%), between 22 and 37 years of age ($M = 30.23$, $SD = 4.40$), and indicated that they completed high school (33%), some college (31%), or had a bachelor's and/or graduate degree (21%). All focal children lived with a stepparent during adolescence, the majority lived with a stepfather (76%). This study was conducted in compliance with institutional review boards of Pennsylvania State University, University of New Mexico, and Montclair State University. As data used for this study were public use data with no participant identifiers, no institutional review board approval was required.

Measurement

Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and a correlation matrix are presented in Table 1.

Primary Respondent Measures: Relationship Stability

Relationship stability was measured with a single-item asking how likely the respondent was to separate from their spouse/partner. Response options ranged from 1 (*very high*) to 5 (*very low*), with higher scores indicating greater stability ($M = 4.55$, $SD = .81$).

Table 1
Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables Between Stepfamily Types Groups

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Stepparent–biological-parent relationship stability	—	.05	.24*	.06	.06	.15	.16	-.34*	-.06
2. Stepparent-stepchild involvement	.14*	—	.36**	.62**	.05	.12	-.14	-.08	.03
3. Stepparent-stepchild closeness	.17*	.41**	—	.30**	.35**	-.04	.13	-.03	.01
4. Mother–child involvement	.04	.50**	.14*	—	.35**	.09	-.09	.09	.32**
5. Mother–child closeness	.05	.01	.29**	.22**	—	-.07	.26*	-.08	-.04
6. Father–child involvement	.18*	.27**	.20**	-.04	-.08	—	.23*	.21	-.02
7. Father–child closeness	.07	.01	.33**	.01	.30**	.35**	—	-.05	-.13
8. Overnights with NR parent, n	.14*	.08	-.08	.10	-.05	.15*	-.08	—	-.05
9. Child gender (1 = female)	-.03	-.06	.05	.22**	.09	-.10	-.01	.02	—
Mean	4.55	20.33	18.11	21.16	19.43	16.40	17.43	19.83	—
SD	.81	6.65	3.40	5.17	2.96	4.97	3.80	30.39	—
Range	1–5	9–35	6–24	8–30	9–24	8–30	7–24	0–200	0–1
α	—	.90	.84	.88	.77	.90	.81	—	—

Note. NR = nonresident. Biological-father–stepmother household upper quadrant and biological-mother–stepfather household lower quadrant.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Focal Child Measures

(Step)parent involvement. (Step)parent involvement was measured using six items summed that asked about the frequency of involvement between focal child and stepparent/father/mother during the past 3 months (e.g., frequency spent time with stepparent/father/mother; frequency saw stepparent/father/mother in the past 3 months). Response options ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*more than once per week*). Averages were as follows: stepparent ($M = 20.33$), father ($M = 16.40$), and mother ($M = 21.16$).

(Step)parent closeness. Stepparent/father/mother closeness was measured by summing six items indicating emotional connection with the child (e.g., tense around stepparent/father/mother). Response options ranged from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*) with higher scores reflecting greater closeness and average scores identifies as follows: stepparent ($M = 18.11$), father ($M = 17.43$), and mother ($M = 19.43$).

Control Variables

Two control variables were used in this study: child gender (1 = female, 57%; 0 = male) and the number of overnights with the nonresident parent during adolescence, measured at Wave 2 ($M = 27.84$, $SD = 93.42$). The duration of the step-couple relationship (i.e., years married or cohabiting) was initially examined as a potential covariate; however, it was not included as it was not associated with other study the variables.

Data Analysis Plan

Preliminary and missing data analyses were conducted in SPSS Version 23.0. Path analyses and multigroup analyses were performed using Amos structural equation modeling software (Arbuckle, 2013). During preliminary analyses, normality assumptions were met, and no issues of collinearity were present. Missing data were examined using Little's missing-completely-at-random test. Results indicated that the largest amount of missing data was 8% and related to relationship stability. Little's missing-completely-at-random test revealed that these data were most likely not missing completely at random, $\chi^2 = 265.97$ ($df = 172$), $p < .001$. No evident patterns were observed. Accordingly, maximum likelihood estimation was used (McGinniss & Harel, 2016).

Following preliminary analyses, three separate alternative path models were analyzed. This modeling strategy was executed to assess the hypothesized ordering of relationships between variables given the lack of longitudinal data (Sweet & Bumpass, 2002; van Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2013) that includes our variables of interest. As Thompson (2000) discusses, model fit is most persuasive when alternative models are compared against one another. To assess model fit across alternative models, we assessed the comparative fit index, goodness-of-fit index (GFI) and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and Akaike information criterion (AIC), and Bayesian information criterion (BIC; West, Taylor, & Wei, 2012). In addition to testing three models, multigroup analyses were conducted between stepparent household type (i.e., stepmother and stepfather) for each model, using an unconstrained-constrained approach. First, an unconstrained model was run, followed by a fully constrained model (Hoyle, 2012). Then the unconstrained and constrained models were com-

pared using chi-square difference testing to examine the presence of moderation (Gaskin, 2012). Next, path specific moderation was conducted and was identified when the chi square result fell within the confidence interval range produced by the chi-square difference test.

Results

Results From Preliminary Analysis

Correlations were run between the main study variables and controls. Within biological-father-stepmother households, relationship stability was correlated with only stepparent-stepchild closeness, $r = .24$, $p < .01$. However, for biological-mother-stepfather households relationship stability was positively associated with stepparent involvement, $r = .14$, $p < .05$, stepparent-child closeness, $r = .17$, $p < .05$, and father-child involvement, $r = .18$, $p < .05$. Father involvement was not associated with any variables within biological-father-stepmother households; yet, within biological-mother-stepfather households, father involvement was positively associated with stepparent-stepchild involvement, $r = .27$, $p < .05$, stepparent-stepchild closeness, $r = .20$, $p < .05$, and father-child closeness, $r = .35$, $p < .01$. The number of overnights with the nonresident parent was negatively correlated with stepcouple stability in biological-father-stepmother households, $r = -.34$, $p < .05$. In biological-mother-stepfather households, the number of overnights with the nonresident parent was positively correlated with stepcouple stability, $r = .14$, $p < .05$ and father-child involvement, $r = .15$, $p < .05$. Child gender was correlated with mother-child involvement in both biological-father-stepmother households, $r = .32$, $p < .01$ and biological-mother-stepfather households, $r = .22$, $p < .01$, such that mothers were more involved with daughters than with sons.

Main Effects Models

Model 1. The first model tested the mediating influence of the stepparent's, mother's, and father's closeness with the child between relationship stability and the stepparent's, mother's and father's involvement with the child (see Figure 1). During path analyses, correlations of error terms of mediating variables and criterion variables were included for each model to isolate the unique influence on the endogenous variables, and adequately assess the unique and independent influence of mediating variables on each dependent variable (West et al., 2012). The unconstrained model demonstrated good fit, $\chi^2(50) = 50.45$, $p = .42$; GFI = .98; adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI) = .97; RMSEA = .01; AIC = 169.44 (Saturated AIC = 220.00); BIC = 180.89. Bollen-Stine bootstrapping results showed that the p value was greater than .05 ($p = .35$), indicating that the proposed model is consistent with the sample data (Walker & Smith, 2016). To test for moderation, a constrained model was analyzed. Parameters were constrained to be equivalent across stepmother and stepfather households. This model demonstrated adequate fit, $\chi^2(71) = 88.71$, $p = .07$; GFI = .95; AGFI = .94; RMSEA = .04; AIC = 166.71; BIC = 173.87. Bollen-Stine bootstrapping results ($p = .15$) also indicated that the proposed constrained model is consistent with the sample data. The chi square difference test illustrated moderation present at the model level, $\chi^2(19) = 35.27$, $p = .01$, or that

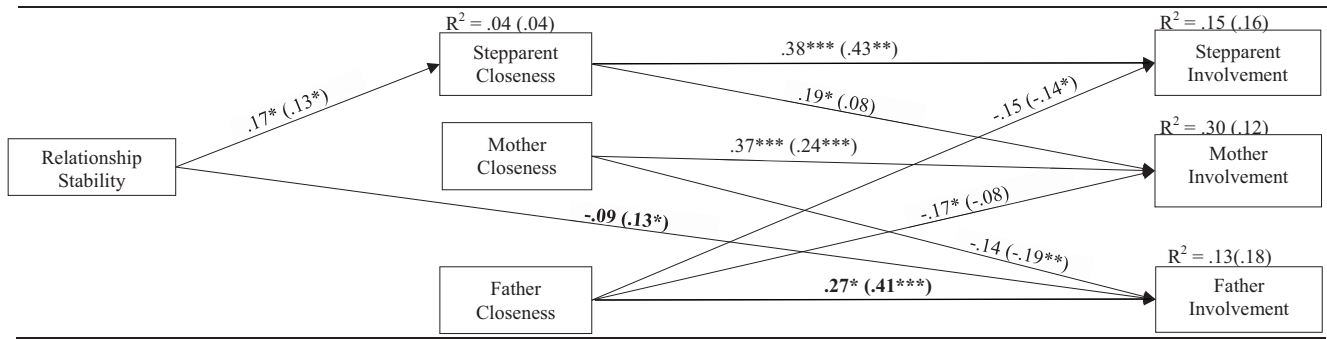


Figure 1. Unconstrained path model testing relationship stability on (step) parent involvement and moderated by stepparent household. Biological-mother–stepfather household parameter estimates within parentheses and biological-father–stepmother household outside parentheses. Significant differences between household types are in bold. Variance estimates for full sample. Model fit statistics: $\chi^2(50) = 50.45, p = .42$; goodness-of-fit index = .98; adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI) = .97; root mean square error of approximation = .01; Akaike information criterion = 169.44 (saturated = 220.00); Bayesian information criterion = 180.89. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

this model did vary by stepparent household type. Among stepfather households, this model accounted for 18% of variance in father involvement, 16% in stepparent involvement, 12% in mother involvement, and 4% of the variance in stepparent–child closeness. The stepmother household model accounted for 30% of the variance in mother involvement, 15% in stepparent involvement, 13% in father involvement, and 4% of the effect in stepparent–child closeness.

Path level moderation indicated that the association between relationship stability and father involvement varied by stepparent household type, $\chi^2(70) = 56.44, p = .10$. Results suggested that, within stepfather households, as relationship stability increased father involvement also increased. This relationship was not present in stepmother households. Father–child closeness also had a greater effect on father’s involvement within stepfather households versus stepmother households. In stepfather households, father–child closeness had a negative relationship with stepparent involvement. There was no relationship present within stepmother households. In addition, father–child closeness was negatively

associated with mother–child involvement within stepmother households. In both stepmother and stepfather households as mother–child closeness increased, mother involvement also increased. Mother–child closeness was negatively associated with father–child involvement within stepfather households.

Stepparent closeness was identified as the only significant mediator within this model. The ratio of the indirect effect, .06, to the total effect of .06 (Ditlevsen, Christensen, Lynch, Damsgaard, & Keiding, 2005), indicated that stepparent–child closeness mediated 99% of the effect between relationship stability (i.e., likelihood of separation) and stepparent–child involvement within stepfather households. A similar effect was present within stepmother households, with over 90% of the effect between relationship stability and stepparent child involvement mediated by stepparent–child closeness. Stepparent closeness also mediated 99% of the effect between relationship stability and mother–child involvement.

Model 2. This model (see Figure 2) tested the mediating role of stepparent, mother, and father involvement on the link between

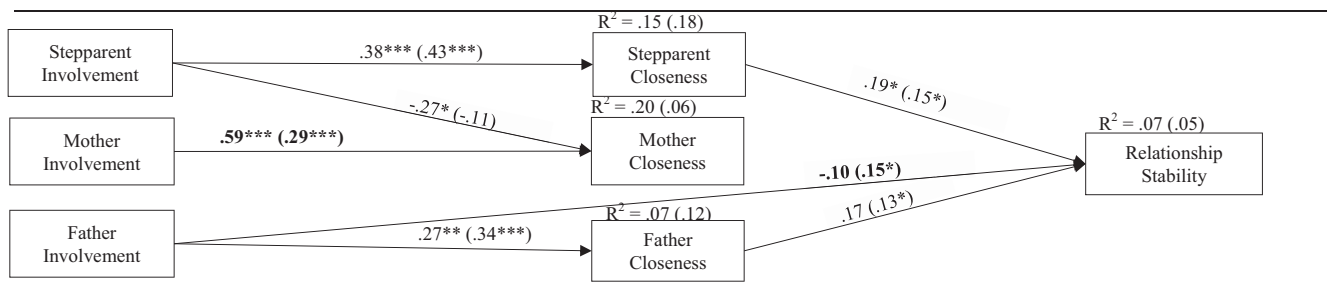


Figure 2. Unconstrained path model testing (step) parent involvement on relationship stability and moderated by stepparent household. Biological-mother–stepfather household parameter estimates within parentheses and biological-father–stepmother household outside parentheses. Significant differences between household types are in bold. Variance estimates for full sample. Model fit statistics: $\chi^2(40) = 48.69, p = .16$; goodness-of-fit index = .98; adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI) = .95; root mean square error of approximation = .03; Akaike information criterion = 148.69 (saturated = 180.00); Bayesian information criterion = 156.92. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

stepparent, mother, and father closeness and biological parent–stepparent relationship stability. The unconstrained model demonstrated good fit, $\chi^2(40) = 48.69, p = .16$; GFI = .98; AGFI = .95; RMSEA = .03; AIC = 148.69 (Saturated AIC = 180.00); BIC = 156.92. Bollen–Stine bootstrapping results ($p = .35$) indicated that the proposed constrained model is consistent with the sample data. Moderation was conducted next, with results indicating that the constrained model demonstrated adequate model fit, $\chi^2(56) = 91.97, p = .07$; GFI = .95; AGFI = .94; RMSEA = .06; AIC = 159.97; BIC = 165.61; Bollen–Stine bootstrapping results, $p = .15$. Moderation was present at the model level, $\chi^2(16) = 43.38, p = .001$. This suggests that the smaller and more parsimonious model fit for the sample data better (Schermelleh-Engel, Moosbrugger, & Müller, 2003). Path level moderation was conducted next to see if any paths were moderated by stepfamily household type.

Two paths were moderated by stepfamily household type (see Figure 2). The effect of father involvement on relationship stability differed at the path level, $\chi^2(41) = 51.40, p = .15$. Within stepfather households, father involvement was associated with greater relationship stability between biological mothers and stepfathers. Within stepmother households no effect was present. In addition, the association between mother involvement and mother–child closeness differed significantly at the path level, $\chi^2(41) = 53.45, p = .10$. Mother involvement was associated with mother–child closeness; however, the effect was significantly greater in stepmother households, when compared to stepfather households. Similar to Model 1, stepparent closeness was a significant mediator (99% of the effect) for both stepparent household types. In Model 2, however, father closeness also mediated 25% of the effect between father involvement and relationship stability in stepfather households.

Model 3. The third and final model (see Figure 3) tested the mediating effect of stepparent’s, mother’s, and father’s involvement on the link between relationship stability and stepparent’s, mother’s, and father’s closeness. The unconstrained model demonstrated good overall model fit, $\chi^2(56) = 61.22, p = .29$; GFI = .98; AGFI = .97; RMSEA = .02; AIC = 169.23 (Saturated AIC = 220.00); BIC = 179.16; Bollen–Stine bootstrapping results, $p =$

.29. Moderation was conducted next, with results indicating that the constrained model demonstrated adequate model fit as well, $\chi^2(73) = 92.03, p = .06$; GFI = .95; AGFI = .94; RMSEA = .04; AIC = 166.03; BIC = 172.83; Bollen–Stine bootstrapping results, $p = .40$, and that moderation was present at the model level, $\chi^2(17) = 30.81, p = .02$.

Path-level moderation indicated that the effect of relationship stability on father involvement differed by stepfamily household type at the path level, $\chi^2(57) = 64.74, p = .25$. Within stepfather households, as relationship instability increased, father involvement increased. This effect was not present for stepmother households. The effect between mother involvement and mother–child closeness also differed by stepfamily household type, $\chi^2(57) = 67.56, p = .16$. Within both stepfather and stepmother, as mother involvement increased, mother–child closeness also increased, and this association was stronger for stepmother families. For stepfather households, stepparent involvement mediated 99% of the effect between stability and stepparent closeness. Also, within stepfather households, father involvement mediated 33% of the effect between relationship stability and father closeness.

Model Comparisons

All three models demonstrated adequate fit to the data, indicating that each alternative model provides a potential explanation for associations among stepcouple stability, (step)parent–adult child closeness, and involvement. Yet, if we consider BIC and AIC for each model, which have been documented as indices to compare model fit for non-nested models (West et al., 2012), Model 2 provides the best fit to the sample data. The value of BIC was 20.75 and 17.62 points smaller for Model 2, compared to Models 1 and 3, respectively, with differences larger than 10.00 providing evidence in support of the lower BIC value (West et al., 2012). The AIC results showed a similar pattern. When AIC results are interpreted, the solution closest to the saturated AIC value is considered as providing a better fit to the data (West et al., 2012). AIC for Model 2 was closest to the saturated AIC value, indicating that Model 2 provided a better fit to the data than Models 1 and 3. Taken together, these findings suggest that the most probable order

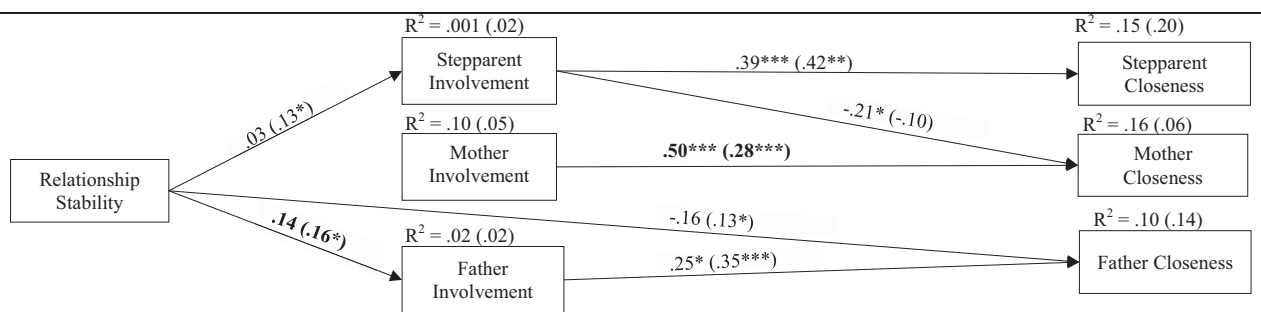


Figure 3. Unconstrained path model testing relationship stability on (step) parent closeness on (step) parent closeness and moderated by stepparent household. Biological-mother–stepfather household parameter estimates within parentheses and biological-father–stepmother household outside parentheses. Significant differences between household types are in bold. Variance estimates for full sample. Model fit statistics: $\chi^2(56) = 61.22, p = .29$; goodness-of-fit index = .98; adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI) = .97; root mean square error of approximation = .02; Akaike information criterion = 169.23 (saturated = 220.00); Bayesian information criterion = 179.16. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

of association is that parental involvement is associated with parent–child closeness, which, in turn, is associated with step-couple relationship stability.

Discussion

Stepfamily relationships are important to parents and children well into adulthood (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Although family systems theory and extant research suggest that stepfamily relationships are reciprocally linked (Cox & Paley, 1997; King & Lindstrom, 2016), associations among multiple stepfamily relationships have not been examined simultaneously in stepfamilies with adult children and research on stepmother families is particularly limited. The current study used an alternative modeling strategy to examine the associations among stepcouple relationship stability and parent–child relationships for both stepfather and stepmother families. In support of family systems theory, we found that all three models fit the data well, suggesting that associations among stepcouple relationship stability and two aspects of multiple parent–adult child relationships (resident parent, stepparent, and nonresident parent closeness and involvement) are likely mutually influential in stepfamilies with adult children. However, the best fitting model suggests that pathways of influence may run most strongly from (step)parent involvement to (step)parent–child closeness which, in turn, is linked to changes in stepcouple relationship stability. In line with previous research (King, 2006, 2007; King & Lindstrom, 2016), results from this model suggest that family relationships are generally positively associated among families with adult stepchildren, although some findings vary, as discussed below. Some associations among family relationships also differed for stepmother and stepfather families, suggesting that the nature of some stepfamily relationships differs according to social and structural attributes of these families (biological relatedness, resident status, [step]parent gender).

We found some support for the perspective that parental legitimacy is conveyed by biological relatedness and gender for mothers, regardless of resident status, and biological relatedness for resident fathers (King, 2007; King et al., 2014). Findings across our models show that some aspect of parent–child relationships is associated with stepcouple relationship stability for each parent type, except for mothers (both resident and nonresident) and resident fathers. Stepcouple stability was generally associated with stepparent–child relationships, even in the absence of such links for biological resident parents, suggesting that biological parents maintain closeness with adult children, even in the face of unstable relationships with their partners (stepparents) and regardless of stepparent–child relationship qualities.

Other parent–child relationships were associated with relationship stability. For example, the best-fitting model (Model 2) shows that stepfather–child closeness, nonresident father–child closeness, and nonresident father involvement are all positively associated with mother–stepfather relationship stability. These findings are consistent with previous research showing positive associations between the quality of mother–stepfather and stepfather–child relationships for adolescent and adult children (King, 2006; King & Lindstrom, 2016), but contrast with previous findings that adolescents are closer to fathers when mothers and stepfathers are less happily married (King, 2006). It may be that father involvement is less stressful for the mother–stepfather relationship when

children are adults and the strains of coparenting and loyalty conflicts are reduced, enabling the child to maintain involvement with both father figures without negatively affecting the mother–stepfather relationship. Also, some children report an increased ability to renegotiate relationships with fathers as they mature into adulthood (Feistman et al., 2016), and such maturity may allow some adult children to navigate competing demands of multiple family relationships, including the relationship with the mother–stepfather dyad. The opposite order of association is also possible. Stable mother–stepfather relationships may encourage father–adult child relationships (see Models 1 and 3), especially when positive relationships make extended family gatherings less conflictual or more satisfying. Longitudinal research is needed to clarify the direction of association among these variables.

Whereas previous research found no link between father–stepmother happiness and stepmother–child closeness among families with adolescents (King, 2007), we found a positive association between stepmother–adult child closeness and stepmother–father relationship stability. Perhaps stepmother–child relationships are more important to father–stepmother relationship stability when the child is an adult. Some fathers rely on stepmothers as kin-keepers (Schmeeckle, 2007), and this role may become more important to maintaining ties when the child no longer lives in the home and parent–child relationships are less automatic. The stepcouple relationship may be enhanced when stepmothers maintain positive ties to adult stepchildren. The reverse is also possible; stepmothers and children may be encouraged to develop closer and more involved relationships with each other when father–stepmother relationships are more stable and less conflictual (see Models 1 and 3).

Consistent with previous research (King, 2006; King & Lindstrom, 2016), we found only limited evidence that stepfather– and nonresident father–child relationships are associated. Only Model 1 showed that when nonresident children reported greater closeness with fathers, they also reported stepfathers were less involved. We also found some evidence that aspects of nonresident mother–child and stepmother–child relationships are associated. These findings contrast with previous research showing no links among mother– and stepmother–adolescent relationships (King, 2007), suggesting that the nature of these relationships may change as children enter adulthood. It may be that stepmother–child relationships become more consequential over time. When stepmothers initially enter the family, they likely have little influence over other family relationships as they have little shared history with the child or other family members. The early influence of stepmothers on mother–child relationships may be further limited by relatively high levels of involvement among nonresident mothers and children (King, 2007). Stepmothers in this study have lived with the child since adolescence (or earlier), giving them time to establish family roles. Living with the child likely fosters solidarity between the stepmother and child over time (Schmeeckle et al., 2006), ultimately making the stepmother–child relationship more influential in the family system. Stepmothers may also establish greater influence when children are autonomous adults and there is less concern about usurping the mother’s role (Crohn, 2006).

We found evidence that stepmother involvement is negatively associated with mother–child closeness (Model 2), but stepmother–child closeness is positively associated with mother involvement. While these findings may initially appear contradic-

tory, they emphasize that involvement and closeness represent distinct dimensions of parent–child relationships. Whereas closeness represents the affective quality of the parent–child relationship, involvement includes the frequency of parent–child interaction or engagement, regardless of the quality of the relationship (King, 2006; Pleck, 2010). For stepmothers, closeness may provide a stronger orientation to the child’s needs, and stepmothers may choose to foster the mother–child involvement for the sake of the child. This is consistent with findings from qualitative research showing that stepmothers often become family managers (Weaver & Coleman, 2005), and kin-keepers when children are adults (Schmeeckle, 2007).

In contrast to stepmother–child closeness, stepmother involvement may not foster mother–child relationships. The negative association between stepmother involvement and mother–child closeness may be at least partially related to circumstances that result in mothers becoming noncustodial parents, such as financial difficulties, emotional problems, and substance abuse (Herrerías, 1995, 2008). These factors may limit the mother’s ability to form a close relationship with the child, and stepmothers may become more involved in the absence of a close mother–child relationship. It also may be that adult children choose to be highly involved with stepmothers when they are less close with mothers, and some adult children report stepmothers provide advice or support in areas where mothers are less knowledgeable or strong (Crohn, 2006). Alternatively, children may become less-close with mothers when stepmothers are highly involved. Future research should explore these possibilities.

In summary, findings from this study suggest stepcouple relationship stability likely is best used as an outcome variable when considering links among stepfamily relationships, at least until such as time as quality longitudinal data become available. Once longitudinal data are available, these paths should be retested. We found that mother–child relationships and resident father–child relationships were not associated with stepcouple stability. Given the primary role of biological mothers in most families, and perhaps biological fathers in stepmother families (King, 2006, 2007), it makes sense that variability in relationship stability might be related most to what is going on with stepparents and nonresident fathers. Aspects of stepmother–child relationships in stepmother families and aspects of both stepfather–child and nonresident father–child relationships in stepfather families were positively associated with stepcouple relationship stability. These findings suggest that stepcouple relationships are generally more stable when parent–adult child relationships across the family system are positive. However, there was some evidence that stepparent–child closeness and involvement are not necessarily positively linked with nonresident parent closeness and involvement. Specifically, there was limited evidence that stepfathers are less involved when father–adolescent relationships are closer. Also, associations among nonresident mother–child and stepmother–child relationships were mixed. Mothers were more involved when stepmother–child relationships were close, yet mother–child relationships were less-close when stepmothers were more involved, suggesting that closeness and involvement function differently in these parent–child relationships. Taken together, findings suggest that stepfamily relationships should be nurtured and developed, as they continue to exchange influence within and across households when children are well into adulthood.

Limitations and Conclusion

Findings from this study should be considered in light of several limitations. First, cross sectional data limits our ability to infer causal relationships, although using an alternative modeling strategy adds rigor to this study in the absence of longitudinal data. The NSFH did not engage in or include interviews with focal children prior to Wave 3, and longitudinal data are needed to examine links among stepfamily relationships over time. Nonetheless, findings from this study provide initial insight into the links among multiple relationships among stepfamilies with adult children. A second limitation regards the generalizability of the findings. Though the NSFH uses a representative sample, the delimited sample from Wave 3 is largely made up of White, lower to middle-income families with young adult children. Generalizing findings beyond this sample should be done with caution, and research is needed to examine family dynamics among stepfamilies with adult children across cultural contexts. For example, African American families are historically pedifocal in nature and they tend to accommodate multiple parent–child relationships more flexibly than do White families (Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, 1999). In addition, NSFH did not consider “nontraditional” stepfamilies, such as those headed by lesbian, gay, or transgender parents. Therefore, future research should examine these varying and intersecting stepfamily identities, as they are understudied (van Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2013). An additional limitation is that some family relationships (e.g., stepparent–nonresident parent relationships) were not included in NSFH data, and accounting for such relationships may help explain variation in other stepfamily relationships. A final limitation concerns the need to consider multiple family members’ perspectives, as opposed to solely the perspectives of the adult focal–child and resident (step)parent. The consideration of multiple perspectives could provide a more nuanced account of processes by which family relationships influence each other. Despite these limitations, this study is the first to provide insight into the multidirectional influence of multiple family relationships among stepfamilies with adult children for both stepfather and stepmother families. Findings suggest the need for family practitioners and therapists to consider multiple family relationships when working with individuals or subsystems in these complex families, and considerations for stepfather and stepmother families may differ in this work.

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Received March 11, 2018

Revision received September 24, 2018

Accepted September 27, 2018 ■

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