

**Like my own children:
Relations to adult stepchildren in the context of serial parenting**

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Extended abstract

The parent-child relation is often considered the fundamental kinship tie (Rossi & Rossi, 1990): Once a parent, always a parent. Yet, with an increase in parental separation and repartnering, Western societies have witnessed an increase in the diversity of parent-child ties (Thomson, 2014). When starting a new union, it has become more likely that one or both partners already have children from a previous union, forming a stepfamily. Possibly, joint children are being born within these stepfamilies, leading to an even more complex network of biological, residential, and legal ties. As a result, the different dimensions of parenthood – such as biological relatedness, childrearing, living in one household and parental authority – are disconnected in an increasing number of families. This raises the question of how we define a ‘real’ parent-child tie.

Both sociological (e.g., Rossi & Rossi, 1990) and evolutionary (e.g., Buss, 2016) approaches to kinship imply that there is a hierarchy in parent-child ties, with the biological tie as its standard marker. Genetic relatedness – and the evolutionary drive for survival of the own genes – would lie at the core of the existence of norms and obligations concerning parent-child relations. In contrast, motives in stepparent-stepchild relations are less clear as they are defined by (impermanent) social relations, rather than genes. This ambiguity has been conceptualized as the “incomplete institutionalization” of remarriage and the stepfamily – in contrast to the well-established intact, first marriage family (Cherlin, 1978). On that account, we tend to evaluate the quality and meaning of stepparent-child relations by comparing them to biological parent-child ties.

One approach to comparing stepparent-child ties to biological parent-child ties is to assess them on different dimensions, such as closeness, frequency of contact, or exchange of support (e.g., Kalmijn et al., 2019; Steinbach & Hank, 2016). Although this tells us how similar these relations are in terms of how they manifest themselves, it does not show to what extent parents and children themselves give similar meaning to these different types of relations and in turn, apply similar norms and obligations.

An alternative, more direct approach is to ask parents and children to what extent they consider the relation to their stepparent/stepchild like a relation to a ‘real’ or ‘own’ parent/child, dubbed ‘claiming’ (e.g., Blyaert, Van Parys, De Mol, & Buysse, 2016; Marsiglio, 2004). Such studies clearly show that there is large variation in how stepparents perceive and experience the relation to their stepchildren (Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998). These variations, and the patterns underlying them, could provide insight into how people develop and define parent-child relations. For example, the experience of having lived with the stepchild might form an important requirement for experiencing a parent-like relationship. Although the existing (mainly qualitative) literature provides important insights into stepparents’ experiences, the small, select samples that have been used thus far do not lend themselves for any population-level estimations of the prevalence of claiming or the patterns underlying it.

The current study combines the direct approach of asking stepparents to what extent they consider their stepchildren their own children with the advantages of large-scale survey data. Using a large sample of Dutch stepparents ($N = 3,328$), it aims to substantiate the phenomenon of claiming by considering two major themes. First, the dimensions of parenthood that have been found to be important to parent-child ties – co-residence, duration, and parental partnership (Kalmijn et al., 2019) – could be considered crucial in the absence of a biological tie. Having been part of the stepchild’s youth and upbringing (e.g., the first day of school, family dinners) might fosters parent-like feelings, whereas the permanence signalled by marriage to the biological parent of the stepchild creates a secure context to develop such feelings. Second, when stepparents indicate to perceive their stepchildren as their own children, an important question is what their frame of reference is. In this light, I study the role of relations to biological children – those born in previous unions as well as those born in the stepfamily – in claiming stepchildren.

Data and method

The analyses are based on data of the recently collected Ouders en Kinderen in Nederland survey (Parents and Children in the Netherlands [OKiN]; Kalmijn et al., 2018), which is highly suitable for this study. The OKiN data contain an oversample of (adult) children who experienced parental separation during youth as well as children who lived with a stepparent. This is an important advantage over most other datasets, in which respondents with stepchildren are too few in number to make any distinctions between them. In contrast to most existing work on this topic – focusing primarily on parents with minor stepchildren – I

study adult parent-child relations (children aged 18 to 50). Shared time and experiences, especially the early years of the child's life, are pivotal in shaping the parent-child relation (Ainsworth, 1989). Having already lived through this critical period, adult parent-child relations provide the opportunity to unravel how the circumstances and experiences in the younger years of the stepparent-child tie determines its meaning later in life.

Whereas previous studies focused exclusively on either stepfathers or stepmothers, this is the first study that considers both. Furthermore, the survey assessed parents' relations to biological children from previous partnerships, and relations to the step- and biological children from their current partnership. This allows me to study how parents' relations to their biological children relate to how they perceive their stepchildren.

(Preliminary) results

The dependent variable – stepparents' claiming – was assessed with the item "I regard my stepchildren like my own children", which was measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*fully disagree*) to 5 (*fully agree*) with an average of 3.3 (SD = 1.3). OLS regression models (Table 1) predict claiming with the main independent variables – age youngest stepchild at start union, duration and status union, co-residence, and whether the stepparent has biological children from previous unions or the previous union – controlling for stepparents' age, gender, and closeness to the stepchildren.

The results suggest that the more similar the structural circumstances (co-residence, duration, etc.) are to a "traditional" parent-child relation, the more stepparents tend to claim stepchildren as their own, even controlling for the closeness between the stepparent and - children.

The findings regarding whether stepparents have biological children do not show really strong effects. Yet, they clearly show that parents without biological children are not more hesitant to regard their stepchildren as their own. Apparently, also without having their own children, they have a certain frame of reference for such a relationship. Instead, having biological children reduces the level of claiming of stepchildren. This could indicate that parents without biological children perceive their stepchildren as substitutes to children they do not have. At the same time, it could indicate that the presence of biological children introduces a loyalty conflict. In further analyses, I will look deeper into how relations to biological children intervene with claiming of stepchildren.

Table 1. OLS regression models of stepparents' claiming (N = 3,328)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Age youngest stepchild at start union (ref. 0 to 9)						
10 to 18	-0.13**	0.04	-0.14**	0.04	-0.14**	0.04
19 to 28	-0.13*	0.07	-0.13*	0.07	-0.13*	0.07
28 or older	-0.05	0.11	-0.02	0.11	-0.03	0.11
Duration current union	0.02***	<0.01	0.02***	<0.01	0.02***	<0.01
Co-residence with stepchild (ref. no)	0.36***	0.04	0.36***	0.04	0.36***	0.04
Married (ref. cohabiting)	0.16***	0.04	0.16***	0.04	0.16***	0.04
Average closeness stepchildren	0.57***	0.02	0.57***	0.02	0.57***	0.02
Mother (ref. father)	-0.37***	0.04	-0.38***	0.04	-0.35***	0.04
Age	<0.01	<0.01	<-0.01	<0.01	<-0.01	<0.01
Other biological parent deceased	0.06	0.05	0.06	0.05	0.05	0.05
Has no bio children ex-partner (ref. does have)			0.13**	0.04	0.13**	0.04
Has no bio children current union (ref. does have)			0.11	0.05	0.11*	0.05
Closeness bio children ex-partner					-0.05*	0.02
Closeness bio children current partner					-0.03	0.06
Constant	1.48***	0.20	1.58***	0.21	1.86***	0.34
R-square	0.42		0.42		0.42	

Standard errors in second column

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

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