Title: The Repercussions of Gendered Division of Household Labor for Stepparents' Experience with Raising Children

Extended abstract: National estimates show that the proportion of children who do not grow up with their two biological parents but with a biological parent and a stepparent is increasing (Kalmijn et al., 2018; Thomson, 2014). Research into these stepfamilies has mostly focused on child outcomes, biological mother's socioeconomic well-being, divorced fathers' relations with children, and stepfathers' contributions to stepchildren. Stepmothers have remained largely a blind spot for researchers.

In earlier generations, where stepfamilies were often precipitated by maternal death (van Poppel, Schenk, & van Gaalen, 2013), stepmothers performed the role of primary caregivers. In later generations, characterized by an increase in partnership instability, sole maternal custody was the default legal arrangement and thus, the fathers' new partners were delegated to the highly peripheral position of 'stepmothers at a distance'. Currently, however, the portion of shared residence agreements has steadily increased (Cancian, Meyer, Brown, & Cook, 2014; Poortman & van Gaalen, 2017), with some countries even implementing shared custody as the default post-divorce arrangement (e.g., Netherlands). This means that we are witnessing the emergence of the stepmother from someone who existed in the margins of the family network to a more central parent figure.

Qualitative studies have suggested that "it is easier to be a stepfather than to be a stepmother" (Levin, 1997, p.178). The added burden of step*motherhood* (on top of the one for being a step- and not a biological parent) is a key explanation in the few studies which have examined these women's well-being and show that being a stepmother comes at a cost for psychological adjustment (Doodson & Davies, 2014; Shafer & Pace, 2015) and for the strength of intergenerational ties (van Houdt, Kalmijn, & Ivanova, 2019). Crucially, the disadvantage in the quality of intergenerational relationships persists even *after* accounting for the length of parent-child coresidence (Kalmijn et al., 2019). In other words, the unique challenges which stepmothers face do not stem entirely from the highly gendered patterns of postdivorce child-residence arrangements.

In this contribution, we focus on the conditions which can exacerbate the negative experience of stepparenthood for women in particular. We depart from the understanding that stepmothers exist in a state of structural ambivalence. Though the concept of ambivalence is hardly foreign in sociology (van Gaalen, Dykstra, & Komter, 2010), it is usually conceptualized on the individual level and focuses on individuals' conflicting feelings. However, what is important to consider with respect to the stepmother role is that ambivalence is structurally created when social institutions (family, gender) have distinct guidelines for behaviors (Connidis & McMullin, 2002b, 2002a). Whereas men have *not* been traditionally expected to perform an active role within households in terms of care and unpaid labor provision, this has been a focal expectation for women. Given the peripheral role which stepparents are structurally assigned within families (e.g., Boele-Woelki, Braat, & Curry-Sumner, 2005), the expectations from stepfathers as fathers and stepparents are compatible. However, stepmothers are in a situation where opposing scripts for behaviors are ascribed to them through their two socially constructed roles – that of a *mother* and a *stepparent*. Stepmothers are expected to be highly central within the family system as mothers but also – to remain more peripheral as stepparents. When this tension is prominent, it can affect both their well-being, as well as, family cohesion (stepmother-child ties; Connidis & McMullin, 2002a, 2002b).

Following the line of reasoning outlined above, we focus explicitly on how gendered division of labor within stepfamilies might exacerbate the difficulties which stepparents (and stepmothers in particular) face in raising stepchildren. In other words, we address the following research questions: 1) Can gender differences be observed in how stepparenthood is experienced by mothers and fathers? 2) Does an unequal division of household labor exacerbate the potentially negative experience of stepparenthood, particularly for mothers?

We utilize the "Parents and Children in the Netherlands" survey (OKiN, *Ouders en Kinderen in Nederland*; Kalmijn et al., 2018). The survey is based on a stratified random sample from the national registers of independently living adults, born in the Netherlands between 1971 and 1991 (aged 25-45). It contains a large oversample (75%) of persons who grew up with separated and widowed parents, with an oversample of persons who grew up with a stepparent. These sampling strata were defined by the registered residence address of the primary respondents at age 15 and their biological parent(s) and possible new partners. Both the primary respondents (also referred to as *anchors*), as well as, their biological parents and these parents' current partners (designated *alters*) were independently approached for participation, with response rates of respectively 62% (N = 6,232) and 38% (N = 9,325). The response rate for the anchors is considerably higher that other large-scale Dutch surveys (de Leeuw & de Heer, 2002), whereas the lower response of the parents is due to the absence of a face-to-face interview (see Kalmijn et al., 2018 for further information). Given the current study's focus on the parents' experience with stepparenthood, we utilized the alter data. Due to the oversampling strategy, the number of stepparents in the OKiN survey is notably higher than in many other frequently used data sources, namely, n = 3,909 (51.7% female).

The dependent variable in the analyses was the self-reported by the alters **difficulty with raising stepchildren** (single item, "Raising children has been difficult for me", coded from 1= *fully disagree* to 5 = *fully agree*). The key independent variable is the alter-reported **division of household tasks**. This variable was based on the self-reported division of the following three tasks: cooking, laundry, and cleaning (rated on scale from 1 = *(almost) always by me* to 5 = *(almost) always by my partner*). The three items were recoded so that a low value denoted the least traditional arrangement (i.e., the task was (almost) always performed by the male partner) and a high value denoted the most traditional division of labor (i.e., the teask was (almost) always performed by the female partner); the three items were then combined in a single scale.

For the preliminary analyses which will be discussed below, we controlled for several additional factors. We controlled for the stepparent's involvement in a number of childrearing tasks during the stepchildren's youth in order to properly assess the true association between division of household labor and the difficulties experienced with stepparenthood. Stepparents reported about their involvement in the following tasks with stepchildren: 1) talked about school-related issues; 2) helped out with school assignments; 3) discussed personal issues; and 4) participated in hobbies and leisure activities. The items were originally rated on a scale from 1 = *very often* to 4 = *(almost) never*; the four items were recoded and combined into a single scale where a higher value denoted higher frequency of involvement. Additionally, we controlled for whether the stepparent was a coresident stepparent during the stepchildren's youth, as well as, for how accepted the stepparent felt by the other biological parent of the child (i.e., not the current partner). With respect to the characteristics of the current partnership, we accounted for its duration in years, as well as, for the participant's self-reported trust in their partner ("I find it difficult to trust my partner", 1 = *fully agree* to 5 = *fully disagree*). Though this single item is not an explicit measure of the quality of the current partnership, this was the

best measure we had available in the data. Finally, we controlled for the lowest quality stepparent-child tie (as reported by the stepparent, coded from 1 = *not close at all* to 5 = *very close*) and whether the stepparent had biological children in addition to the stepchildren. Descriptive information about all variables is presented in Table 1.

Important to note here is that we did not have a comparable "difficulty with raising children" variable for the parents who were only biological parents. Therefore, it could be argued that our findings are not stepparent-specific but rather, gender-specific. In order to address this concern, we examined the association between the division of household labor variable and the alter-reported life-satisfaction for all types of parents. This variable was measured using three items from the short Satisfaction with Life Scale of Diener and colleagues (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; Pavot & Diener, 2009). The alters rated on a scale from 1 = *completely agree* to 5 = *completely disagree* the following statements: "My life is ideal in most respects", "The conditions of my life are excellent", and "All in all, I am satisfied with my life". The scale was created based on the mean of the three recoded items. We found that whereas the association was not significant for any type of father (biological or step), it was significant and negative for stepmothers (r = -.06, p < .01). Interestingly, the association for women who were only biological mothers was positive (though not statistically significant). We interpret this as an indication that indeed, division of household labor has different repercussions for step- and only-biological parents.

Table 2 displays the findings from the linear regression models, capturing the association between division of household labor and stepparents' difficulty with raising stepchildren. For these analyses, we clustered the standard errors within anchors, as multiple stepparents (stepfather and stepmother) could be reporting about the same stepchildren.

Our preliminary findings clearly indicate that raising stepchildren is experienced as more challenging by stepmothers than stepfathers. As can be seen in Model 1, being a stepmother was associated with .48 higher self-reported difficulties than being a stepfather. This amounts to about half a standard deviation difference between stepfathers and stepmothers which is certainly not negligible. Importantly, this is after accounting for the concurrent quality of stepparent-child ties and for how accepted the stepparent felt by the other biological parent. When we turn to the findings about gendered division of household labor, we see that adhering to a more traditional split is not associated with the stepparenthood experiences of fathers. However, for mothers, we can see a positive association between a more unequal split and the level of difficulty that these women experienced as stepmothers.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for variables used in preliminary analyses

	Stepfather (n = 1,889)	Stepmother (n = 2,020)
Difficulty with raising stepchildren (1-5, 5=highest)	M = 2.41 (SD = 1.03)	M = 2.95 (SD = 1.10)
Division of household tasks (1-5, 5 = most traditional)	M = 3.87 (SD = 0.83)	M = 4.01 (SD = 0.82)
Involvement in childrearing tasks with stepchildren (1-4, 4 = highest)	M = 2.50 (SD = 0.64)	M = 2.30 (SD = 0.75)
Quality of least close stepparent-child tie (1-5, 5 = closest)	M = 2.73 (SD = 1.20)	M = 2.42 (SD = 1.14)
Level of trust in current partner (1-5, 5 = highest)	M = 4.15 (SD = 0.80)	M = 4.01 (SD = 0.86)
Feeling accepted by the other biological parent (1-5, 5=highest)	M = 3.13 (SD = 1.22)	M = 2.65 (SD = 1.31)
Duration of the current union in years	M = 17.54 (SD = 9.69)	M = 17.19 (SD = 9.72)
The stepparent coresided with the stepchild(ren)	M = .73	M = .37
The stepparent has step- and biological children	M = .80	M = .84

Table 2. Regression of stepparents' difficulty with stepparenting

	Model 1	Model 2
Stepmother (ref. = stepfather)	.481**	.007
	(9.27)	(.03)
Gendered division of hh tasks (5=always fem partner)	.001	-.053
	(.03)	(-1.31)
Interaction: Gendered division of labor X stepmother		.120*
		(2.03)
Controls		
Stepparent lived with the stepchildren in youth (ref. = no)	.272**	.274**
	(4.62)	(4.66)
The stepparent does not have bio children (ref. = also has bio children)	.125*	.130*
	(2.13)	(2.22)
Involvement in childrearing tasks with stepchildren during youth	-.233**	-.232**
	(-6.03)	(-6.01)
Closeness of lowest quality tie with a stepchild	-.203**	-.202**
	(-9.11)	(-9.06)
Level of trust in current partner (i.e., biological parent of stepchild)	-.178**	-.175**
	(-5.41)	(-5.33)
Feeling accepted by the other biological parent of the stepchild	-.140**	-.140**
	(-6.90)	(-6.96)
Duration of the current partnership (in years)	-.004	-.004
	(-1.50)	(-1.44)
Constant	4.541**	4.732**
	(20.82)	(20.05)
Adjusted $R2$	.200	.202

Note: T-values in parentheses.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

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