

What are the costs of dissonance? The antecedents and consequences of adult children having dissimilar ties to biological parents and stepparents

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Abstract

This study examines the prevalence, determinants, and consequences of dissonant relationships within stepfamilies. Parent-child ties are assumed to be vital for the functioning of stepfamilies and the well-being of their members. However, since family ties are interrelated, some have argued that we should *not* study the quality of (step)parent-child ties in separate analyses, but in relation to one another. One way to do so is by focusing on the different patterns that can be detected when we consider children's ties to biological parents and stepparents simultaneously. Our first goal is to document how many adults grow up to be close to the biological parent only (dissonant pattern), to both the biological parent and the stepparent (positive consonant pattern), or to neither parent in the stepfamily household (negative consonant pattern). Our second goal is to examine if these patterns are associated with long-term child and parent well-being. Drawing on balance arguments, we propose that a main source of strain for stepfamily functioning are the dissonant patterns of relationships (e.g., close to the biological parent, but distant to the new partner). We use the OKiN, which includes $N = 1,472$ adult children who grew up with a stepfather and $N = 1,222$ adult children who grew up with a stepmother. A unique feature is that it includes reports by children about their well-being and their ties to all present parents *and* independent reports by these parents about their own subjective well-being. Preliminary findings suggest that dissonance plays a role for child well-being.

Extended abstract

1. Introduction

Due to recent divorce and remarriage trends, a growing population of adults have grown up in more complex types of family situations. Concerns have been voiced about the long-term implications, as

parents and children in divorced families or stepfamilies generally have lower levels of well-being than those from intact families (Cherlin, 1999). Although several factors may contribute to well-being in stepfamilies, there is a consensus among scholars that the quality of parent-child ties plays a vital role. There is much support for this statement, as closer parent-child ties and stepparent-child ties have previously been linked to less behavioral problems, less adjustment problems, and higher levels of subjective well-being among children and adolescents (Amato, 1998; Fagen et al., 1996). In addition, research among divorced parents found that being close to the child from the previous partnership is related to better parent well-being (Ward, 2008), although it is unclear if the relationship quality between the child and stepparent has an impact on the divorced parent's well-being.

Most of these studies, however, are focused on the quality of one parent-child tie or one stepparent-child tie at the time, thereby not considering that stepfamily ties are likely to be connected to one another. One way to acknowledge that the quality of (step)parent-child ties – and their effects on well-being – may be linked, is to examine the patterns that may have developed in children's parallel ties to biological parents and stepparents (King, 2006; Sobolewski & Amato, 2008). If we consider the parent-stepparent-child triad, for instance, we could detect how commonly children have grown up to be emotionally close to their biological parent, but emotionally distant from the new partner of that parent (i.e., the stepparent). This is of importance, since such a pattern may be a main source of strain for the functioning of a stepfamily and, subsequently, for the well-being of the child and the biological parent involved in that stepfamily.

In this paper, our first aim is to explore how many children grow up to be close to the biological parent only (dissonant pattern), to the biological parent and stepparent both (positive consonant pattern), or to neither parent figure in the stepfamily household (negative consonant pattern)¹. We also explore which background factors, such as the child's gender, number of siblings, or relations to other kin, are connected to a greater likelihood of being close to the biological parent only. Our second aim is to examine whether the three relationship patterns have consequences for the well-being of the child and the divorced parent involved in the stepfamily. We draw upon two contrasting

¹ Note that there are also adults in our sample who grow up to be close with their stepparent but distant from their biological parent. However, number of cases is too small to make meaningful comparisons.

arguments to formulate our hypotheses, namely on resource and balance arguments. Whereas resource theories predict that parent-child ties have an additive effect on well-being (e.g., the more the merrier), balance theories predict that dissonance is such a stressor that close ties with both parents *and* close ties to neither parent are more beneficial for well-being than close ties to only the biological parent.

2. Theory and hypotheses

Although biological parents are assumed to have a greater impact on child well-being than stepparents, some argue that children's ties to stepparents may have an additive effect (King, 2006). *Resource arguments* build upon the assumption that each parent is able to make independent contributions to a child, which means that the more positive parent-child ties a child has, the better off he is in terms of well-being. Child well-being would benefit from being close to the biological parent and the new partner of that parent, with two close relationships being better than one, and one close relationship being better than none (H1a). Parent well-being would also benefit from a close parent-child tie, but the contributions a new partner makes in a child are not expected to have additional effects (H2a).

Balance arguments (Cartwright & Harary, 1956) emphasize people's desire that interpersonal relationships are consistent. A relationship patterns between three people is consistent when person *a* likes person *b* and person *c*, and person *b* and person *c* also have positive attitudes towards each other. An unbalanced pattern exists when person *b* and *c* do not get along. An example of an unbalanced pattern occurs when a divorced parent has a new partner, but their child and their new partner do not have a good relationship with each other (dissonant pattern). Child well-being may be affected by this pattern because it creates tension or conflicts of interest, which are stressors in itself, but also because it reduces the buffering of a close biological parent tie against external stressors. At the same time, the biological parent is likely to experience psychological dilemma which decreases their well-being. In short, balancing predicts that close ties with both parents will benefit child and parent outcomes, while close ties between the child and neither parent relates to better outcomes than between the child and biological parent only. This applies to child well-being (H1b) and parent well-being (H2b).

3. Data and method

We use data from the OKiN survey (Parents and Children in the Netherlands, Kalmijn et al., 2018), which includes information on the intergenerational relationships of adult children from divorced and remarried families. The adult children (also referred to as ‘anchors’) reported on their ties with biological parents and stepparents. A unique feature of the OKiN survey is that it also includes independently collected data among all parent figures of the children (also referred to as ‘alters’). This enables us to use reports from adult children on well-being and the relationships with their parents, as well as, reports from parents on their own well-being and the relationship with the adult child. From the anchor data, we selected $N = 1,472$ adults who grew up with divorced parents and a present stepfather, as well as, $N = 1,222$ adults who grew up with divorced parents and a present stepmother. Alter reports were matched.

To create the three relationship patterns, closeness to biological parents and stepparents was dichotomized into *close* (4 and 5) and *not close* (1, 2 and 3) and cross classified (the categorization is based on King, 2006). To examine which background factors are associated with the three relationship patterns, we make comparisons using multinomial logit models. This method is appropriate when the dependent variable has more than two categories that have no apparent ordering. Next to individual background factors, such as age or gender, we include predictors on the duration of co-residence between the adult child and biological parent. As parental involvement may be divided across all involved children, we also include the number of full siblings, half siblings, and stepsiblings as predictors. And lastly, we include information about the adult child’s closeness to the other biological parent and the potential presence of another stepparent as predictors in our multinomial logit models.

Finally, to perform our analyses on well-being, we use OLS regression and examine the associations between the three relationship patterns and child and parent well-being. We use a continuous three-item measure of self-perceived life satisfaction ($\alpha = .85$) as outcome, which is assumed to be a key element of subjective well-being (SWB; Pavot and Diener, 2009). In summary, we perform separate analyses for adult child SWB, biological mother SWB, and biological father SWB.

4. Preliminary results

Approximately 25.6% of adults who grew up with a stepfather report to be close to their biological mother but distant to the stepfather. Among those who grew up with a stepmother, 22.8% report to be

close to the biological father but distant to the stepmother (see Table 2). For child well-being in stepfather families, analyses suggest that those with close ties to both parents have significantly better SWB than those who are close to neither parent ($B = -0.30, p < .01$) or only the biological parent ($B = -0.24, p < .01$). There is no significant difference in SWB between those with close ties to neither parent and those with close ties to only the biological parent. This suggests that one close parent-child tie is not related to significantly higher levels of SWB, potentially due to the stress related to dissonant ties.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	Stepfather families				Stepmother families			
	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max
<i>Relationship quality</i>								
Biomother-child closeness	3.92	1.17	1	5	3.01	1.31	1	5
Stepfather-child closeness	3.31	1.18	1	5	-	-	-	-
Biofather-child closeness	3.30	1.34	1	5	2.54	1.17	1	5
Stepmother-child closeness	-	-	-	-	3.09	1.14	1	5
<i>Background variables</i>								
Age at divorce	7.11	3.09	0	17	7.77	3.87	1	17
Duration of co-residence	17.00	2.36	0	18	9.61	5.04	1	18
Number of full siblings	1.17	0.98	0	5	1.24	0.93	0	5
Number of half siblings	0.34	0.69	0	5	0.49	0.86	0	5
Number of step siblings	1.06	1.20	0	5	0.84	1.06	0	5
Other stepparent (1 = yes)	0.41	0.49			0.46	0.49		
<i>Well-being variables</i>								
Adult child life satisfaction	3.91	0.71	1	5	3.9	0.71	1	5
Bioparent life satisfaction	3.90	0.70	1	5	4.01	0.63	1	5
<i>Individual controls</i>								
Age	31.89	5.13	25	45	32.19	5.25	25	45
Female	0.56	0.49			0.53	0.50		
Sample size (<i>N</i>)	1472				1222			

Notes. Note that we only measure the number of halfsiblings and stepsiblings that are connected to the specified stepfamily household (e.g., halfsiblings via the father or halfsiblings via the mother)

Table 2. Patterns of children's closeness to their biological parents and the new partners of these parents, divided by mother's household and father's household.

	Stepfather families	Stepmother families
Close to both parents	685 (46.5%)	265 (20.9%)
Close to neither parent	371 (25.2%)	694 (54.7%)
Close to the biological parent only	377(25.6%)	289 (22.8%)
Close to the stepparent only	40 (2.7%)	21 (1.7%)
<i>N</i>	1472	1222

Notes: Closeness was measured on a 5 point Likert-scale and dichotomized into *close* (scores of 4-5) and *not close* (1-3). This categorization is based on King (2006). Note that those who are close to the stepparent only are excluded from the analyses, as the number of cases is too small to make meaningful comparisons.

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