

PERCEPTIONS OF FAMILY CONCEPTS OF STEPFATHER AND  
STEPMOTHER STEPFAMILY DYADS

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A DISSERTATION  
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE  
TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

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DENTON, TEXAS

MAY 1981

## Acknowledgments

Throughout the process of this study, from its inception through execution and completion, many individuals have contributed in large measure. Dr. Virginia Jolly, chairperson for the project, has given her scholarly expertise, her wise counsel, her constructive criticism and her personal warmth. Committee members Dr. John McFarland, Dr. Paul Thetford, Dr. Basil Hamilton and Dr. Karen Jackson have also been unfailingly supportive both of the project and this investigator. To each of them, I wish to express my sincere appreciation.

A special thanks to each of the stepfamily parents who expressed their strong interest in the study and who gave of their time and their perceptions of their family as subjects. I particularly appreciate the assistance of Dr. William Radcliffe in this regard.

Acknowledgment of the immense contribution of Dr. Dave Marshall in helping with computerization and analysis cannot be overlooked.

Thanks are due to fellow graduate students Nancy Hampton, Kathy Korzenowski and Dora Vela for their guidance, their thoughtful advice and their friendship throughout the course of graduate study.

To my mentor, Dr. Bill Erwin, I express my gratitude for his continuing interest in and commitment to the realization of my academic goals.

I express deep appreciation to my mother, Grace Chancey, who instilled in me a love of learning and who taught me, by her example, that one need never stop learning; and that personal growth is a life-long experience.

Lastly, to Rowan, my husband and stepfather of my three children, without whose wholehearted devotion, encouragement, unending patience, and faith in me this project would not be a reality, I acknowledge its accomplishment as equally his.

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Perceptions of Family Concepts of Stepfather and  
Stepmother Stepfamily Dyads

Remarriage among men and women, who have children from a previous marriage, has become increasingly commonplace in our society. Bartlett (1979) notes that there are probably 25 million stepparents and that one out of six children is a stepchild. Capaldi and McRae (1979) state that "over one-third of this country's population exists in the family system of his, hers, mine and ours" (p. 4).

Walker and Messinger (1979) state that stepfamilies are different from natural or "intact" families both psychologically and structurally. However, research on the stepfamily is limited and almost entirely of recent origin.

A review of the literature indicates that investigators have generally compared some or all members of one structural variety of stepfamily to that of the intact family (Buhr, 1975; Keith, 1977; Medeiros, 1977), or have studied stepfamily members intrapsychically (Draughon, 1975; Nadler, 1977; Sardanis-Zimmerman, 1977). Perceived relationships of stepparents to stepchildren have been reported (Bohannon & Erikson, 1978). There is agreement among researchers who have studied stepfamily

relationships that a strong marital dyad is necessary to successfully "blend" a stepfamily (Albrecht, 1979; Bartlett, 1972; Bernard, 1956; Cherlin, 1978; Schulman, 1972; Walker, Rogers, & Messinger, 1977). Likewise, similarities of perceptions of individual family members regarding their family is seen as important to a successful marriage (Capaldi & McRae, 1979). Also, certain demographic variables have been posited to relate to successfully integrating the stepfamily into a cohesive unit (Bernard, 1956; Duberman, 1973; Messinger, 1976). The present study focused on differences in perceptions of family concepts of stepfather and stepmother stepfamily dyads as to effectiveness, satisfaction, and congruence.

Society has historically given its unconditional approval only to the nuclear stereotype family and has continued to disapprove of separation and divorce in order to maintain the stability of the family as an institution. Visher and Visher (1979) suggest that cultural and personal factors probably contribute to give an impression that stepfamilies are nuclear families, however, they state that there is unanimous agreement among professionals that the stepfamily, like foster and adoptive families, is different structurally.

Complexity is the hallmark of the stepfamily both as to structure and problems (Einstein, 1980). The present investigator was overwhelmed with the possible variations in structure of the stepfamily phenomena. These include but are not limited to: (a) natural mother and offspring of either or both sexes residing with stepfather (who may or may not have children of his own residing elsewhere and having visitation rights); (b) natural father and his offspring residing with stepmother (an increasingly common occurrence as more courts award custody to fathers in divorce cases); (c) natural mother and her offspring residing with natural father and his offspring; (d) any of the foregoing structural variations having one or more mutual offspring resulting from their remarriage; (e) both adults having offspring either grown or residing elsewhere who maintain relationships and visitations, and (f) any of these who are living together by mutual agreement but who are not legally married (Visher & Visher, 1979). McClenahan (cited in Visher & Visher, 1979, pp. 25-27) has compiled statistics which conceptualize all possible interactions within an idealized nuclear family consisting of mother and father, their respective two parents and their two children at 247, while interactions

among stepfamilies, given remarriage couples, their remarried ex-spouses and children at possibly in excess of eight million!

Bernard (1956), in her important early study of remarrieds, placed emphasis on the remarried dyad as of "fundamental importance in determining the quality of the relationship in a marriage" (p. vi). Relatively little research on either remarriage or the remarried family was conducted during the 1960s and early 1970s. Interest in the phenomena by scholars has increased rapidly since that time, with much relevant scholarly literature being advanced only very recently. Stepfamily Bulletin and Stepparent's Forum are now being published and are aimed at increasing understanding and awareness of stepfamily problems. Two national organizations now exist to help stepparents and their families with their common problems and to share common concerns.

Much of the literature on the stepfamily considers various aspects related to the stepchild's role in the stepfamily. Admittedly, the stepchild is an integral part of the stepfamily and family interaction, however, limitation of this study to the stepfather and stepmother dyad precludes discussion of the stepchild except as

he or she may be considered within that context (Bohannon & Erickson, 1978; Bowerman & Irish, 1962; Perkins, 1977).

Studies of stepfathers have predominated in the stepfamily literature, possibly because the stepfather family is the most common structural variety. Bohannon and Erickson (1978) compared stepchildren with children raised by natural parents. While stepchildren reported they were as happy and as socially and academically adjusted as children in natural families, their stepfathers believed them to be less happy. Stepfathers also saw themselves as less effective parents than the natural fathers saw themselves. "Stepfathers seemed to measure themselves by some ideal role model of 'father'" (p. 59).

The role of stepfather in our society is ambiguously defined (Rallings, 1976). Legally, it was pointed out, the stepfather is a nonparent. He cited the folklore, wherein stepfathers are often depicted as cruel exploiters of their wife's children (both sexually and economically), as detrimental to stepfathers' self-perception. Perkins (1977) found that stepfathers and stepchildren understood each others' perceptions of their families less well than natural children and their fathers. Mowatt (1972), in working with stepfathers and their wives in

a clinical setting, found stepfathers uncertain of their roles and as to how much "father" role it was safe to assume. They were also unsure of what kind and amount of affection to give stepchildren. Discipline and rule enforcement difficulties were also considered.

Stepfathers often see themselves as the "outsider," as "different," and as "isolated" in the family, according to several authors (Bernard, 1956; Bohannon & Erickson, 1978; Visher & Visher, 1979). The assimilation of a new family member is a difficult task (Ransom, Schlesinger, & Derdeyn, 1979). Stepfather family integration around child discipline was discussed by Stern (1978). She saw integration of stepfather discipline as a process requiring 1 1/2 to 2 years from the time of remarriage. She emphasized the need to establish a friendship with the stepchild first, and observed that a child must be willing to accept discipline because he or she respects and wants approval from the disciplinarian, which she saw as taking both time and effort to develop. The shared history and values of the natural mother and her children, the stepchild's reluctance to accept him as father when the natural father may still be very much present in the child's life, and the stepfather's perception of a tendency of his wife and her

children to side against him on important issues are said to contribute to this feeling.

Conversely, a study conducted by Wilson, Zurcher, McAdams, Claire, and Curtis (1975) using data from the 1973 National Opinion Research Center and the 1973 Youth in Transition Survey found no statistically significant differences in perceptions of natural fathers and stepfathers either as to characteristics of interpersonal relationship or as related to marriage and the family. Stepfathers were no more or less happy with their marriage than natural fathers.

Stepmothers also face stigmatizing cultural myths, with the result that they often try too hard to be perfect. Sardanis-Zimmerman (1977) compared self-perceptions of step and natural mothers and concluded that stepmothers are uncomfortable in their relationships with stepchildren and are psychologically adversely affected by the fairy tales and mythology of the wicked stepmother. Schulman (1972) noted that some cultures deliberately try to purvey the stepmother in positive language. The French are said to refer to a stepmother as "belle mere" (beautiful mother). She agreed that myths and unfavorable expectations deter adjustment by placing unnecessary stresses on family members. Fast

and Chethik (1978) pointed out that even dictionaries generally define the term "stepmother" disparagingly.

Nadler (1976) examined part-time stepmothers, full-time stepmothers, and natural mothers to assess the psychological stress of the stepmother. Her findings suggested that this stress may be traced to the stepmothers' perceived lack of support for their role, for personal need satisfaction, or the development of a healthy self-image, either in stepfamilies or the larger society.

Walker, Rogers, and Messinger (1977) reviewed several stepfamily studies and stated that there is general agreement that the stepmother role is the most difficult of the steprelationships. In a study of 2,145 stepchildren, Bowerman and Irish (1962) found that among adolescents, stepmothers were less favorably perceived than stepfathers, and there was less affection for the stepmother than the stepfather. Stepmothers, on the other hand, often consider behavior difficulties of the stepchild as proof of their own shortcomings (Schulman, 1972). Draughon (1975) maintained that both the conflicting nature and the ambiguity of the stepmother role might be lessened in most cases by her choosing to be "other mother" rather than either primary mother or

friend, assuming the stepchild had completed either a literal or psychological mourning for the biological mother.

Natural parents in the stepfamily are rarely differentiated by sex in the literature and have received scant attention. Capaldi and McRae (1979) saw the natural parent as occupying a central position in the stepfamily, therefore often being pulled in many directions. Accordingly, it was averred, they must achieve a balance between the demands made upon them, the meeting of their own needs, and their available time. Fast and Chethik (1978) believed that natural parents are often hypersensitive. They were seen as having uneasy feelings that their children were part of a "package deal" and not really wanted by their new spouse; they may feel guilt for having foisted children on the spouse, and they may feel guilt about depriving their children of a natural parent and substituting a stepparent. Further, it was maintained that the natural parent, while desiring the stepparent to act as parent, may ambivalently dislike giving up absolute control in disciplining the children and in financial responsibilities to them. "Tips for Stepparents" (1978) pointed out that

natural parents often find themselves caught between loyalties to their children and a wish to be esteemed by their spouse.

It has been estimated that 40% of remarriages fail (Visher & Visher, 1979). How many of these marriages included children from a prior marriage is not known. Several authors (Kleinman, Rosenberg, & Whiteside, 1979; Ransom et al., 1979; Walker et al., 1977) maintained that self-reported remarital happiness may be inflated because the dyad has a large psychological investment in perceiving the remarriage as successful. Remarrieds may feel threatened by any conflict and see it as the forerunner to another failed marriage. Society's severe sanctions against more than two marriages may also contribute to overreporting of marital happiness by remarried individuals.

Cherlin (1978) argued that because the institution of remarriage is ill defined, family unity is difficult to achieve. He cited two major institutions, language and the law, as having failed to fully recognize remarriage. The language contains no adequate terms to describe important social roles in remarriage. Ambiguity results when a child tries to describe the new wife of his father, when the child resides with a divorced and

remarried mother. The law, he alleged, largely continues to assume that remarriages are first marriages and does not adequately protect children in remarriage households against sexual relationships among its members.

Capaldi and McRae (1979) said that husbands and wives in stepfamilies have insufficient time to blend perceptions and must deal with three or more previous family systems (childhood, first marriage, single parent) on the part of each partner if they were both previously married, so that they face the formidable task of blending four to six perceptions of family. Often, it is suggested, each partner simply assumes that the other partner shares similar beliefs and values about family structure.

Schulman (1972) saw the blended family as fragmented at first, moving through a period of "psuedo wholeness" through acceptance of each family member's uniqueness to adjustment and adaptation to solidarity. She decried the myth of "instant" love wherein step-parents expect that once the marriage has taken place they will feel instant love and devotion for stepchildren.

In some ways, each family member of a stepfamily faces a "Catch 22" situation, according to Einstein (1980). It was also noted that while all families today

face pressures, the complexity of relationships in which the stepfamily is embroiled presents a greater challenge to this type of family. Bowerman and Irish (1962) found that in all aspects, homes involving steprelationships were more likely to have stress, ambivalence, and low cohesiveness than normal homes. For instance, Keith (1977) studied attitudes of natural and stepparent families to childrearing. She reported that stepparents were less accepting of normal childhood behavior and more noncommunicative with stepchildren than were natural parents in intact families.

Incompatibility between stepparents and stepchildren, or among stepsiblings was seen as a threat to family integration by Duberman (1975). In her study of 88 stepfamilies, she reported that stepfamily integration was highly dependent upon stepparent-stepchild relationships. Forty-five percent of husbands and wives in her study rated their families low or moderate on integration and 55% rated their families highly integrated. Goldstein (1974) saw the primary task of the remarriage family as integrating its divergent parts into a new family structure, which he believed to be inherently stressful. Fast and Cain (1966) examined case records of 50 stepfamilies and concluded that stepparents had

difficulty in developing stable patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting toward stepchildren, with contradictory pressures on them to serve as stepparent, parent, and nonparent.

If estimates of remarriage failure are correct, it follows that most remarriages succeed. Kleinman et al. (1979) reviewed issues common to the establishment of relationships among stepfamilies and commented that professionals have observed strengths in many second marriages due to more careful choice of second partner, less idealism, and more willingness to disclose emotions. Both Bernard (1956) and Lobsenz (1980) proffered the views that remarriage partners are often willing to adjust and even lower their expectations for marriage in a second marriage; they are assumed to be both "older and wiser;" and their marriage may be based more on practical than romantic grounds than was probably the case in a first marriage.

Glen and Weaver (1977) used data from surveys conducted in 1973, 1974, and 1975 by National Opinion Research Center to assess marital happiness of remarrieds. No differentiation was made between remarrieds with and without children or from once divorced to more than once divorced remarrieds. There was no significant difference

in the marital happiness reported by remarrieds than those who had remained married, although there was a moderate difference in reported happiness of the respective females, suggesting that remarried males may be better satisfied with their marriage than remarried females. A study of 369 remarrieds as to degree of marital satisfaction by Albrecht (1979) found that 90% of the respondents reported their current marriage as better or much better than a prior marriage regardless of whether or not there were children from the current marriage. The effect of children, either from former or current marriage was positively related to marital satisfaction. Males with children from a current marriage reported greater comparative happiness than males without such children, but the reverse was true for females. As was noted earlier, however, some authors believed that perceptions of happiness by subjective report may be overreported. Perceptions of marital satisfaction as to their congruence were measured by Luckey (1960). In a study with first marriage dyads, there were significant and positive associations between marital satisfaction and congruence of perceptions of self and perception of self by spouse.

Madeiros (1977) examined stepfamily and intact family couples as to their relationship patterns and concluded that the relationship pattern was more important to family functioning than the structure of the family. However, Aldous (1974) maintained that interaction patterns among remarrieds lacks definition and must be achieved through trial and error, and Perkins (1977) found that stepparent families were less satisfied and less adjusted than natural parent families.

There is agreement among researchers that demographic variables are important contributors to success or failure of remarriages, with or without children from former marriages. Bernard's comprehensive study of remarriage in the 50s analyzed vast amounts of demographic data, including variables related to time, class, children, husband, education, religion, and attitudes. Dean and Gurak (1978) studied marital homogamy of women who had been married twice, using age, education, and religious identification as demographic variables. Their findings tended to support a theory that some women are "divorce prone." Information on remarriage and divorce in the United States, using census data, was reported by Glick and Norton (1971). A major finding of the study was that only a very small

percentage of individuals (less than 2%) reported having been married more than twice. Glick (1976) analyzed both census and current population survey data to report on living arrangements of children and young adults. He found that the proportion of children living with only one parent had almost doubled since 1960. Messinger (1976) reviewed demographic variables in her study of 70 remarried couples with children, to conclude that step-families are a "high risk" group for which few guidelines are provided by society. Wilson et al. (1975) used demographic information from two national surveys in their exploratory analysis of stepfathers and step-children. Results are reported elsewhere in this paper. Duberman's (1973) study of step-kin relationships used parental age, education, social class, and prior marital status, and number of children, their residence, age, and sex as demographic variables. She concluded that family solidarity, "the concept of themselves as one functioning unit" (p. 292) has to be consciously strived for if it is to occur at all.

In the review of the literature, it is apparent that a gap exists in comparing the adult members directly involved in the two most prevalent structural varieties of the stepfamily as to their perceptions of that family.

With natural fathers increasingly becoming the custodial parent charged with responsibilities of raising their children, their remarriage may create problems in the couples' perception of family functioning similar to or different from that of the natural mother who brings children of a prior marriage into the stepfamily structure. The literature reveals little about perceptions of either the natural mother or natural father in stepfamilies.

Because professionals who work with stepfamilies may have little understanding of the differing perceptions of family concepts of the marital dyad, this study focuses on this problem. The study investigates differences in perceptions of family concepts among natural parents and stepparents in stepfamilies. The problem of the study is to determine whether there are significant differences among natural mothers, natural fathers, stepmothers and stepfathers in stepfamilies as to their perceived concepts of the family's effectiveness, satisfaction, and congruence, and to determine whether various demographic variables are significantly related to these perceptions. Five separate hypotheses will be tested:

1. There is no difference between stepmother, natural father marital dyads and stepfather, natural mother marital dyads as to perceptions of family effectiveness, family satisfaction, and family congruence.

2. There is no difference between stepmothers and natural mothers in stepfamily dyads in perceptions of family effectiveness, family satisfaction, and family congruence.

3. There is no difference between stepfathers and natural fathers in stepfamily dyads in perceptions of family effectiveness, family satisfaction, and family congruence.

4. There is no difference between stepmothers and stepfathers in stepfamily dyads in perceptions of family effectiveness, family satisfaction, and family congruence.

5. There is no difference between natural mothers and natural fathers in stepfamily dyads in perceptions of family effectiveness, family satisfaction, and family congruence.

## Method

### Subjects

There were a total of 40 subjects participating in the study. These included 10 legally remarried couples

wherein the household was comprised of natural mother, her child or children from a former marriage, and a stepfather, as well as 10 legally remarried couples wherein the household was comprised of natural father, his child or children from a former marriage, and a stepmother. The study excluded those stepparent dyads wherein each of the couple had a child or children from former marriages residing in the household. For purposes of this study, children were defined as being 18 years of age or younger at the time of the study. A consent form was obtained from all persons who agreed to participate. The subjects were solicited from school records, where available, church or civic organizations, colleges and universities, and from newspaper notices. The general population from which subjects were drawn was primarily white middle-class. The generalizability of the results are limited in that respect. Subjects became participants only on a voluntary basis and were not compensated in any way for their agreement to participate.

#### Apparatus

The family Concept Q-Sort, hereinafter referred to as "Q-Sort" (van der Veen, Huebner, Jorgen, & Neja, 1964),

was used to measure perceptions of family effectiveness, family satisfaction, and family congruence. The Q-Sort is an interval scale test consisting of 80 cards, each containing one statement, and 9 large cards sequenced from position "0" ("least like my family") to position "8" ("most like my family"). There is a forced distribution of the statement cards to the large cards of 3, 6, 9, 13, 18, 13, 9, 6, 3. Cumulative scoring of 48 of the times rated plus or minus by a panel of professionals selected by the test author determines scores for family effectiveness, with the subject receiving a point if they place the particular card on the same side of the distribution as had the professionals. The family satisfaction score is obtained through a correlation between a person's "real" and "ideal" sorts based on difference in item scores. Family congruence scores are a correlation of the differences in item scores of the "real" sort of the two family members.

Items of the Q-Sort are concerned not with individual family relationships, but with the perceptions an individual has of the family as a unit (see Appendix E

for item list). The test authors define "family concept" as the way an individual perceives his family as a functioning unit (believed to be the result of patterns of interaction). Along with item scores, scores are developed for family effectiveness, family satisfaction, and family congruence. In a recent article reviewing the theory and development of the Q-Sort methodology, Stephenson (1980) stresses that the Q-Sort transforms subjective communicability into a measurable factor structure amenable to statistical analysis.

Reliabilities using test-retest correlations for family concepts of a group of nonclinic parents were .67 for the "real" and .71 for the "ideal" Q-Sorts over a period of 17 months respectively (van der Veen, Howard, & Austria, 1970). Validity studies conducted by van der Veen over several years appeared to substantiate that the test measures what it purports to measure (van der Veen et al., 1964; van der Veen, 1965). The Q-Sort was individually and separately administered to all subjects in their homes. Testing of the subject couple required approximately 2 hours.

In addition to the Q-Sort, a demographic or fact sheet was completed by each subject. Information relevant to the study was compiled from it (see Appendix D).

Procedure

Prospective subjects were either contacted briefly by telephone or were mailed a copy of the letter to prospective participants (see Appendix B). Those subjects who became participants in the study were tested in their homes at a time mutually agreed upon by both the couple and the examiner. It was believed that a more relaxed atmosphere would produce a more valid score. Upon arriving at the couple's home, approximately 15 to 20 minutes were consumed in getting acquainted, establishing rapport, and putting the subjects at ease. Thereupon, examiner reread the letter to prospective participants (see Appendix B) to the couple. A signed consent waiver which further explained the purpose of the test and its potential risks and benefits was obtained from each participant (see Appendix A). An offer was made to answer any other questions regarding the study that they might wish to ask. Once the couple indicated their readiness to begin the test, the following explanation was given them:

I have here two stacks of cards and I am going to ask each of you to sort this small stack, consisting of 80 cards, each containing a statement about your family, onto one of the large stacks of cards,

numbered "0" through "8." I will be testing each of you separate and apart from your spouse, so that you may sort the statements according to your own perception. I will lay out the large cards, starting with "0" on your far left and continuing through "8" on your far right. The "0" card placement means that you perceive a particular statement to be "least like your family;" the "8" card means you perceive a statement to be "most like your family." Numbers 1 through 7 represent varying degrees of agreement between "least like" and "most like." As you note, each large card requires only a specific number of statement cards. There is no time limit, however, accuracy is very important.

Subject couples were administered the test separately. Each was first asked to sort the cards as accurately as possible to reflect their perception of their present, or real, family--those who resided with them at that time on a permanent basis. After scores were recorded, the subject was asked to repeat the Q-Sort, this time distributing the cards as they perceived they would be placed for an "ideal" family. The statement cards were shuffled so as to provide randomization. After each of the couple had completed both the "real" and "ideal" sorts, they completed

the demographic data sheet. Each of the couple was identified by a number only in order that anonymity be retained. Each of the couples requested they receive a report of the study results and was assured that they would.

### Data Analysis

For each of the five hypotheses, a one-factor multivariate analysis of covariance was utilized with the three subscales of family effectiveness, family satisfaction, and family congruence as dependent measures. Demographic variables were subjected to a stepwise multiple regression in process of defining which of these to include as the covariate set. Each of the three dependent variables was regressed on all the covariates. The "Occupation" covariate was represented as a set of dummy variables and was found not to be significant in predicting any dependent variable, therefore, it was not a part of the analysis. The only covariates which were found to be significant predictors were those of subject's age, education, and number and sex of children resulting from their present marriage. These eight covariates then constituted the covariate set for the analysis of covariance. Level of significance for the multivariate  $F$ -tests was set at  $\text{Alpha} = .05$ .

### Results

The problem of the study was to determine whether there were significant differences among stepfather-natural mother and stepmother-natural father couples in stepfamilies, as to their perceived concepts of their family's effectiveness, satisfaction, and congruence, and to determine whether various demographic variables were significantly related to these perceptions.

The sample consisted of a total of 40 subjects, 10 stepfather stepfamily couples and 10 stepmother stepfamily couples. Criterion for inclusion in the study was that each of the 20 couples have a child or children from a former marriage of one (either the natural father or the natural mother) 18 years of age or younger, residing in the stepfamily on a permanent basis. Stepfamily couples wherein each of the couple had a child or children from a former marriage residing with them were not included in the study (see Tables 1 and 2 for demographic characteristics of the sample).

Hypothesis 1 predicted no difference between stepmother-natural father marital dyads and stepfather-natural mother dyads as to perceptions of family effectiveness, family satisfaction, and family congruence. The hypothesis failed to be rejected (see Table 3).

Table 1  
Means and Ranges of Subjects on Selected Demographic Variables

Item	Stepfather Families		Stepmother Families		Across Families	
	Mean	Range	Mean	Range	Mean	Range
Mother's Age	31.6	21-50	29.8	20-45	30.7	20-50
Father's Age	33.8	20-55	35.6	23-50	34.7	20-55
Length of time remarried (in years)	3.4	.75-7.75	4.2	.17-11.92	3.8	.17-11.92
Times previously married						
Mother	1.4	1-3	1.3*	1-2	1.35	1-3
Father	1.7*	1-3	1.3	1-2	1.5	1-3
Length of time single prior to this marriage (in years)						
Mother	1.8	.17-6.0	4.3*	.83-10.0	3.05	.17-10.0
Father	1.5*	.50-5.0	2.6	.08-8.25	2.05	.08-8.25
Age of child or chil- dren from former marriage residing in present family						
Stepfather family						
Boy ( <u>n</u> = 7)	11.9	4-17				
Girl ( <u>n</u> = 5)	5.9	1.5-10				
Stepmother Family						
Boy ( <u>n</u> = 6)			9.7	4-17		
Girl ( <u>n</u> = 7)			12.3	7-16		

\*n = 6

Table 2  
Subject Frequencies and Percentages of Subjects  
on Selected Demographic Variables

Item	Stepfather Couple				Stepmother Couple			
	Mother		Stepfather		Father		Stepmother	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Previous Marital Status								
Single			4	.40			4	.40
Divorced	10	100.00	6	.60	9	.90	6	.60
Widowed					1	.10		
Educational Level Attained								
Less than 12 years			1	.10				
High school graduate	2	.20	3	.30	1	.10	3	.30
Some college	7	.70	1	.10	3	.30	6	.60
College graduate			2	.20	3	.30	1	.10
Master's degree	1	.10	2	.20				
Professional degree					3	.30		
Doctoral Degree			1	.10				
Family Income								
\$10 - 19,000			5	.50	2	.20		
\$20 - 29,000			2	.20	2	.20		
\$30 - 39,000			2	.20	1	.10		
\$40 - 49,000					2	.20		
\$50 and over			1	.10	2	.20		
Undetermined					1	.10		
Child Support								
Pay			3	.30	2	.20		
Receive	3	.30						
Child or children of former marriage legally adopted by spouse								
Yes	1	.10						
No	9	.90			10	100.00		
Child or children resulting from present marriage								
Yes	5	.50					4	.60
No	5	.50					6	.60

Table 3  
Comparisons of Group Means and Correlations

Hypothesis 1	Step-mother Couples	Step-father Couples	d/f	Obtained $F$	Critical $F^*$
Family Effectiveness	33.5	28.0	5/5	.6622	5.05
Family Satisfaction	.60	.42			
Family Congruence	.45	.57			
Hypothesis 2	Step-mothers	Natural mothers	d/f	Obtained $F$	Critical $F^*$
Family Effectiveness	35.5	29.1	3/11	1.0811	3.59
Family Satisfaction	.67	.47			
Family Congruence	.57	.45			
Hypothesis 3	Step-fathers	Natural fathers	d/f	Obtained $F$	Critical $F^*$
Family Effectiveness	26.9	31.4	3/10	1.2977	3.71
Family Satisfaction	.37	.53			
Family Congruence	.45	.57			
Hypothesis 4	Step-mothers	Step-fathers	d/f	Obtained $F$	Critical $F^*$
Family Effectiveness	35.5	26.9	3/11	1.2905	3.59
Family Satisfaction	.67	.37			
Family Congruence	.57	.45			
Hypothesis 5	Natural mothers	Natural fathers	d/f	Obtained $F$	Critical $F^*$
Family Effectiveness	29.1	31.4	3/11	.6046	3.59
Family Satisfaction	.47	.53			
Family Congruence	.45	.57			

\* $\alpha = .05$

Hypothesis 2 predicted no difference between stepmothers and natural mothers in stepfamily dyads in perceptions of family effectiveness, family satisfaction, and family congruence. The hypothesis failed to be rejected (see Table 3).

Hypothesis 3 predicted no difference between stepfathers and natural fathers in stepfamily dyads in perceptions of family effectiveness, family satisfaction, and family congruence. The hypothesis failed to be rejected (see Table 3).

Hypothesis 4 predicted no difference between stepmothers and stepfathers in stepfamily dyads in perceptions of family effectiveness, family satisfaction, and family congruence. The hypothesis failed to be rejected (see Table 3).

Hypothesis 5 predicted no difference between natural mothers and natural fathers in stepfamily dyads in perceptions of family effectiveness, family satisfaction, and family congruence. The hypothesis failed to be rejected (see Table 3).

### Discussion

Failure to reject any of the five hypothesis regarding differences in perceptions of their family's effectiveness, satisfaction, or congruence by stepfather or stepmother stepfamily dyads, or by those individuals using all comparisons, may be in itself, an important finding. However, given the heterogeneity of the sample almost

all respects, i.e., parent age, length of time married, prior marital status, ages of children from former marriages, education, income, and presence or absence of children resulting from the remarriage, to name but a few divergent characteristics, the lack of statistically significant differences in perceptions of family concepts may be due to the small sample size. Increased variances may have contributed to the finding of non-significance of all hypotheses.

While Bohannon and Erickson (1978) found that stepfathers saw themselves as less effective parents than natural parents of intact families, the present study of natural fathers and stepfathers in stepfamilies found that in their perceptions of their family's effectiveness, there was no significant difference. Although the present study compared natural and stepparents in stepfamilies, the findings tend to support those of Wilson et al. (1975) wherein no statistically significant differences in perceptions of natural fathers in intact families and stepfathers as to their marriage and family were found. They also concluded that stepfathers were no more or less happy with their marriage than natural fathers.

In comparing self-perceptions of step and natural mothers (again using natural mothers in intact families), Sardanis-Zimmerman (1977) concluded that stepmothers were less comfortable in their relationships with the stepchildren. While the present study did not address self-perceptions, there were no statistically significant differences in perceptions of either step or natural mothers in stepfamilies as to their family's effectiveness or satisfaction, nor were the stepcouple congruence, or degree of agreement, statistically different for the stepmother stepfamily than that of the natural mother stepfamily. A factor that may have bearing on this finding was that 40% of the stepmothers and 50% of the natural mothers had produced a child or children by their husband in the remarriage. The four stepmother families had a total of eight children of the remarriage; boys aged 3 and 18 months, and girls aged 6, 4, 4, 3, 2, and 10 months. The five stepfather families had a total of five children resulting from the remarriage; one boy aged 5, and girls aged 4, 3, 14 months, and 6 weeks. Duberman (1973) inferred from her study on stepkin relationships that presence of children resulting from the remarriage tends to strengthen stepfamily relationships. She speculated that children resulting from the remarriage may mean that

the couple feels secure in their relationship with one another and the children from a former marriage.

In each of the two groups represented in the present study (stepfather dyad and stepmother dyad), it is interesting to note that 40% of the stepparents, four stepfathers and four stepmothers, had never been married before. Capaldi and McRae (1979) suggested that perceptions of the family are dependent upon comparisons with that of prior families familiar to the individual. In the case of almost half of the sample stepparents, there was perforce no comparison to a former family other than the parental one (or family of origin). It may be assumed that for them, expectations for the marriage were similar to those of an individual experiencing a first marriage, such as those of the intact family parent of the same sex.

It should be mentioned that self-selection of the participants in the present study may have created a bias toward better satisfied and more successfully integrated stepfamily parents, in that those parents who were contacted and chose not to participate may have been, on the whole, less psychologically healthy in their perceptions of their families.

Further, the present study may support the views of several researchers (Bernard, 1956; Kleinman et al., 1979; Lobsenz, 1980) that remarriages are entered into among persons who are often not only older but wiser than that of initial marriages. Second marriage partners may have less idealism, more willingness to adjust and even lower their expectations for the relationship, be more willing to disclose their emotions, and have a larger investment in the success of the remarriage.

An important implication of this study is that children who remain with their father, either due to decisions of legal custody or death or disability of their natural mother, were perceived as no different by the stepmothers.

#### Suggestions for Further Research

Knowledge of the stepfamily is extremely limited. Because of its increasing prevalence in our society, it is important that research in all areas continue in order that both professionals who work with families as well as the lay public have a better understanding of its unique problems. Relationships of the children to natural parents with whom they no longer reside as compared to that of the stepparent of the same sex needs exploration. Replication of the present study to include all family

members, matching stepfamilies with children between 10-18 years of age would shed more light on perceived effectiveness, satisfaction and congruence (or agreement) among parents and children. Further, comparisons of stepfather and stepmother stepfamilies with intact parent families is needed.

Confidential questionnaire surveys regarding common problems of custody, visitation (particularly at holiday times), sibling rivalry, extended family interference or cooperation, child discipline by stepparents, and children's conflicting loyalties to noncustodial parents and stepparents of the same sex are needed. Studies of the effect on children from former marriages of new stepsiblings in the stepfamily, the relationship of noncustodial children of the stepparent with children and stepparent in the stepfamily, and resolution attempts in stepfamilies as to differences in values and priorities would provide additional needed information.

Because the family is probably society's most basic and most important institution, and because remarriages of couples with children is ever more commonplace, systematic research of stepfamilies and stepfamily relationships is imperative. As our knowledge of the stepfamily grows, professionals who daily work with the family unit will be better able to offer assistance in resolving conflict and

in hastening the integration of the stepfamily as a healthy and cohesive primary group, thereby helping to sustain and enhance the family as an important societal institution.

## APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

Consent Form

TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

HUMAN RESEARCH REVIEW COMMITTEE

1. I hereby authorize Helen Hanes (or representative) to perform the following investigation:

I will be administered a Family Concept Q-Sort, apart from my spouse, to determine my perceptions of my family's effectiveness, satisfaction, and congruence, and to complete a fact questionnaire which may reveal differences in perceptions between groups of natural mothers and fathers and stepmothers and stepfathers depending upon those factors.

Testing will be done in my home at a time convenient to me and my spouse. Approximately two hours will be required to complete testing and information giving.

All information will be kept confidential, and numbers will be used instead of names in analyzing the data. Only group data will be reported.

2. (a) I understand that the investigation described in Paragraph I involves no risks or discomforts.
- (b) I understand that the investigation described in Paragraph I has the following potential benefits:  
A greater understanding of the differences in perceptions of family concepts of natural mothers and fathers and stepmothers and stepfathers and some of the possible ways in which demographic data may be related to these differences, if they occur.
- (c) I understand that no medical services or other compensation is provided to subjects by the university for injury that results from participation in this investigation.

3. An offer to answer any questions I may have concerning the study has been made. I also understand that I may withdraw my participation in the study at any time.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX B

## LETTER TO PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS

Dear Parents,

Your names have been obtained as prospective participants in a study I am conducting in connection with my dissertation leading to a Ph.D. in Psychology at Texas Woman's University. The study concerns the perceptions of parents in a stepfamily relationship as to their family's ways of interacting with one another. Results may prove helpful in improving stepfamily relationships and in a better understanding of how stepfamily members relate to one another.

A test which requires sorting of statements about your family (i.e. "my family gets along very well in the community") into stacks representing varying degrees from "least like my family" to "most like my family" will be administered by a trained examiner, and you will be asked to complete a fact questionnaire covering items such as age and sex of children, your present age, how long you have been remarried, etc. It is anticipated that testing will require no more than a total of two hours for both husband and wife, and all information obtained will be confidential. Only numbers will be used in analyzing the data. No names or individual answers will be used. You may choose to withdraw your participation at any time. I will be pleased to answer any questions you may have regarding the study. You may call me at (817) 326-2765.

Please read carefully the consent form enclosed. Your willingness to participate will be signified by your signing and returning to me the consent form, in the attached envelope.

Your participation will be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

(Mrs.) Helen Hanes  
P.O. Box 241  
Granbury, TX 76048

APPENDIX C

NOTICE TO BE POSTED OR PLACED IN NEWSPAPERS

N O T I C E

A study about stepfamily concepts is currently being conducted. If you are remarried and have children of a former marriage (either yours or your spouse's) eighteen years of age or younger presently living with you, your voluntary participation in the study may result in increased awareness of the complexities of stepfamily living.

For complete information, please contact:

Helen Hanes  
P. O. Box 241  
Granbury, TX 76048  
(817) 326-2765

or

Department of Psychology and Philosophy  
Texas Woman's University  
Box 23029, TWU Station  
(817) 382-5460

APPENDIX D

## DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer all the following questions where and as indicated.

1. Your age (to nearest year) \_\_\_\_\_. Your sex: Male Female  
(Circle one)
2. How long have you been remarried (years and months)?  
\_\_\_\_\_.
3. How many times were you previously married? \_\_\_\_\_?
4. Were you previously: divorced \_\_\_\_; widowed \_\_\_\_;  
single \_\_\_\_\_?
5. How long were you single prior to this remarriage?  
(years and months) \_\_\_\_\_.
6. What is your approximate amount of formal education?  
\_\_\_\_\_.
7. What is your present occupation? \_\_\_\_\_.
8. What is your family's approximate annual income?  
\_\_\_\_\_.
9. Specify the age and sex of the child or children of  
yours resulting from a former marriage. (If more than  
one child, please indicate)  
Boy \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_  
Girl \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_
10. Does this child or children presently reside with you?  
Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_

APPENDIX E

## FAMILY-CONCEPT Q-SORT ITEMS

1. We like to do new and different things.
- + 2. We usually can depend on each other.
- + 3. We have a number of close friends.
4. We often do not agree on important matters.
5. Each of us tries to be the kind of person the others will like.
6. Good manners and proper behavior are very important to us.
- + 7. We feel secure when we are with each other.
8. We want help with our problems.
- + 9. We do many things together.
- 10. Each of us wants to tell the others what to do.
- 11. There are serious differences in our standards and values.
- + 12. We feel free to express any thought or feeling to each other.
- + 13. Our home is the center of our activities.
- + 14. We are an affectionate family.
- 15. It is not our fault that we are having difficulties.
- 16. Little problems often become big ones for us.
- 17. We do not understand each other.
- + 18. We get along very well in the community.
- + 19. We often praise or compliment each other.
- 20. We do not talk about sex.
- 21. We get along much better with persons outside the family than with each other.
22. If we had more money most of our present problems would be gone.
- + 23. We are proud of our family.
- 24. We do not like each other's friends.
- 25. There are many conflicts in our family.
- + 26. We are usually calm and relaxed when we are together.
27. We are not a talkative family.
- + 28. We respect each other's privacy.
- 29. Accomplishing what we want to do seems to be difficult for us.
- 30. We tend to worry about many things.
31. We often upset each other without intending it.
32. Nothing exciting ever seems to happen to us.
33. We are a deeply religious family.
- + 34. We are continually getting to know each other better.
35. We need each other.
36. We do not spend enough time together.
37. We do not understand what is causing our difficulties.
38. Success and prestige are very important to us.

- + 39. We encourage each other to develop in his or her own individual way.
- 40. We are ashamed of some things about our family.
- + 41. We have warm, close relationships with each other.
- 42. There are some topics which we avoid talking about.
- + 43. Together we can overcome almost any difficulty.
- + 44. We really do trust and confide in each other.
- 45. We make many demands on each other.
- 46. We take care of each other.
- 47. Our activities together are usually planned and organized.
- + 48. The family has always been very important to us.
- 49. We get more than our share of illness.
- + 50. We are considerate of each other.
- + 51. We can stand up for our rights if necessary.
- 52. We are all responsible for our family problems.
- 53. There is not enough discipline in our family.
- + 54. We have very good times together.
- 55. We depend on each other too much.
- 56. We often become angry at each other.
- 57. We live largely by other people's standards and values.
- 58. We are not as happy together as we might be.
- 59. We are critical of each other.
- 60. We are satisfied with the way in which we now live.
- 61. Usually each of us goes his own separate way.
- 62. We resent each other's outside activities.
- + 63. We have respect for each other's feelings and opinions even when we differ strongly.
- 64. We sometimes wish we could be an entirely different family.
- + 65. We are sociable and really enjoy being with people.
- 66. We are a disorganized family.
- 67. It is important to us to know how we appear to others.
- 68. Our decisions are not our own, but are forced upon us by circumstances.
- 69. We are not really fond of one another.
- + 70. We are a strong, competent family.
- 71. We just cannot tell each other our real feelings.
- 72. We are not satisfied with anything short of perfection.
- + 73. We forgive each other easily.
- 74. We are usually somewhat reserved with each other.
- 75. We rarely hurt each other's feelings.
- 76. We like the same things.
- + 77. We usually reach decisions by discussion and compromise.
- + 78. We can adjust well to new situations.
- 79. We are liked by most people who know us.
- 80. We are full of life and good spirits.

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