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Marital satisfaction and divorce in couples in stepfamilies[☆]

Anita DeLongis and Amy Zwicker

We review research and theory examining stress and coping in stepfamilies as predictors of marital quality and divorce. Although the divorce rate in first-marriages has stabilized after years of increase in North America, the divorce rate of remarriages continues to increase. We argue that depression and marital distress are both mechanisms through which stepfamily stress impacts marital stability, with parenting stressors particularly potent determinants of divorce. We draw upon our own research predicting divorce across 20 years in 112 married couples in stepfamilies, as well as from the larger literature on stepfamilies.

Address

University of British Columbia, Canada

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Over the last four decades the divorce rate has increased by 600%; this rate is currently about 40–50% of all first marriages in North America [1–3], with the US having the highest divorce rate in the Western world [4]. The majority of those divorced eventually remarry [5], with many of those remarrying bringing children from a previous union with them.

Stepfamilies have the potential to improve family functioning from that of a single parent home. Unfortunately though remarriages are not as stable as first-marriages [6,7], with the divorce rate among remarried couples at least 10% higher than in first-marriages, with rates highest when remarried individuals have children from previous unions [4,5]. Divorce also occurs more quickly in stepfamilies and the rate of repeated divorce is increasing [8].

With a divorce, adults potentially stand to lose social support, experience health problems like depression, and face decreased financial stability [5,9^{☆☆}]. Children of divorced families generally experience more behavioral problems; lower psychological well-being; and poorer self-concept, social relationships, and academic achievement relative to children from nuclear families [10], and these problems worsen with multiple family transitions [11,12^{*}]. Here we focus on the quality of stepfamily relationships and mechanisms that link stepfamily relationship functioning to divorce.

Divorce and remarriage

First marriages and remarriages are not the same; in order to understand how remarriages unfold, the structural differences between nuclear families and stepfamilies must be considered [13]. Key differences include the following. First, parent–child relationships predate the formation of the couple relationship in stepfamilies. This requires that the couple relationship must form while parents maintain their longstanding, and often stronger, relations to their children. This is a reversal from that of traditional nuclear families in which the parental bond predates the existence of children. Second, stepfamilies often come together after the occurrence of loss and change for adults and children alike. Third, adults and children in stepfamilies come together from different individual, marital, and family lifecycles. For example, one partner may enter the stepfamily with children from a previous union whereas the other partner may have never been married and have no children. Given the differing backgrounds of adults and children in stepfamilies, it follows that all will have differing expectations about family functioning that will be brought into the new family. Additional complications arise in that children have biological parents in another household (or in memory, in the case of death) therefore children are often members of two households. This limits the autonomy of stepfamilies relative to first-marriages. Finally, step-parenting often comes with responsibilities, but without the same rights as biological parents. Relatedly, there are inadequate social norms for step-parenting roles, which can limit their effectiveness in parenting.

Remarried couples are more likely to divorce when they bring children into the home [14]. In a large, nationally representative study comparing stepfamilies and nuclear families, money was the most frequent conflict topic in nuclear families whereas children were the most frequent topic of conflict reported in stepfamilies [15]. Consistent with this, we [16] found that over 50% of the stressors reported by couples in our study of stepfamilies were

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related to their children and stepchildren. Disagreements about child behavior, the distribution of resources to children, and co-parenting decisions were among the most common sources of conflict, and greater conflict in stepfamilies has been found to contribute to higher divorce rates [17].

The stepfamily system

Stepparent–child relationships have been the focus of much of the research aimed at understanding stepfamily functioning, and family systems theory has been the most frequent theory drawn upon in studies of stepfamily relationships [18]. Key principles underlying family systems include the conceptualization of families as a whole, with the whole being greater than the sum of its parts [19]. The family system has a hierarchical structure that contains nested subsystems, and adapts to changing conditions in the environment as well as to changes within the system. This model has been used to understand the interdependence of stepfamily members and the complexity of relationships among members [20]. Interdependence suggests that each family member affects, and is affected by, other elements of the family system. The complexity of relationships arises from the various subsystems that make up the family system. A family systems approach focuses on subsystems including the husband–wife (marital) dyad, father–child dyad, mother–child dyad, and sibling dyads to describe the family system. Stepfamily subsystems are complex, and include stepparent–child dyads, stepsibling dyads, and partner–ex-partner dyads. Relationships among family dyads may be particularly important in stepfamilies [21].

The marital dyad

Satisfaction within the marital dyad itself is a strong predictor of subsequent marital outcomes [22]. Demand–withdraw patterns of spousal response to conflict are associated with poor marital outcomes in studies with first married couples, and we examined these patterns among couples living in a stepfamily context [23]. Couples reported relationship conflict, responses to conflict and subsequent affect for seven consecutive days. When husbands engaged in demand or withdraw responses both members of the dyad subsequently reported declines in mood. Wives demanding and withdrawing had no significant cross-spousal impact, but husbands' use of confrontive demanding exacerbated the negative impact of wives' withdrawal on wives' mood.

Although demand and withdraw responses are problematic responses to marital conflict, emotionally supportive and empathic responses are protective responses. In our work with couples in stepfamilies [24] we have also examined the role of empathic responding in marital tension. When greater personal significance was attached to family stressors, couples tended to increase their use of empathic responding. Further, empathic responding was

associated with decreases in next-day marital tension. Our findings further suggest that marital adjustment plays an important role in determining whether the negative effects of stepfamily stress will persist across days, with those with higher marital adjustment more likely to have stress whose impact was limited to a single day [25].

Levels of marital quality are comparable across first-marriages and remarriages, yet remarriages are at greater risk of divorce. Given this, it is important to examine factors other than marital quality and marital interaction to explain the increased rate of divorce in remarriages [26]. Factors that attenuate the relationship between marital quality and divorce include the duration of the marriage, attitudes and beliefs about marriage, insecurity, gender, and race [27]. Stepfamily relationships also play a key role in remarriage outcomes.

The stepfamily context: parent-child dyads

Problems with children often co-occur with marital problems [21,28*]. There is a wealth of research examining the effects of stepfamily life on child outcomes [29*], but much less research that examines the role of children in stepfamily or remarriage outcomes [27]. Findings support the spillover hypothesis that affect and behavior in one family subsystem spreads to other family subsystems. Although most studies examine spillover from the marriage to other family subsystems, evidence of tension spillover from parent–child and sibling dyads to the marital dyad has been found as well [30]. Studies in first married couples indicate that children's behavior affects marital interactions on a daily basis and that over time, these effects accumulate and explain longitudinal effects of child behavior on marital discord [31]. However, there is reason to expect that parent–child relationships in stepfamilies may play an even more important role in marital outcomes as divorce rates are higher when children from a previous union are brought into a home [14].

Further, children in stepfamilies tend to demonstrate higher internalizing and externalizing behavior [8] than do children in first marriages, with child behavior linked to marital satisfaction and stability. In a representative sample of both biological families and stepfamilies, child externalizing behavior predicted increased marital conflict over time [32]. However, the effect of externalizing behavior on marital conflict was stronger in stepfamilies.

Research comparing the quality of relationships between parents and children in nuclear and stepfamilies has demonstrated poorer relationships within stepfamilies [33]. We have found that stepparent–child relationships are characterized by less closeness and more tension relative to biological parent–child relationship [30]. Stepparents can also be placed in competition with biological parents; this may explain the consistent finding that stepmother–child relationships face more difficulty than

all other step-relations, including stepfather–child relationships. Stepmother–child relationships may be more difficult because biological mothers remain more involved than biological fathers, which can create conflicting roles for mothers and stepmothers [34].

Given the unique circumstances of the stepparent–child dyad, it is not surprising that research has found a relationship between this dyad and marital outcomes. In a cross-sectional study comparing relationship quality across family dyads, Fine and Kurdek [21] found that the quality of both biological and stepparent–child relationships were correlated with the quality of the marital relationship; however, this correlation was stronger for stepparent–child relationships relative to biological parent–child relationships.

From stepfamily context to divorce

In our twenty-year longitudinal study examining predictors of divorce in 112 couples in stepfamilies we found that marital quality was a key predictor of divorce [35]. Although these findings parallel those in first marriages, in couples in stepfamilies the effects varied by levels of stepparent–child tension. Couples most vulnerable to divorce were those with high baseline levels of both marital dissatisfaction and stepparent–child tension. One key mechanism through which stepfamily relationship quality may predict divorce is through declining marital quality. Step-family relationships predicted significant changes in marital quality at two years post baseline and declining marital quality was a mechanism through which poor stepfamily relationships contributed to divorce at twenty-year follow-up [36].

Given the link between marital quality and psychopathology in general, a second mechanism through which the effects of stepfamily functioning may predict divorce is depression. Depression can both contribute to and be the result of poor marital relationships [37]. Shapiro and Steward [38] found that stepmothers reported more depression and parenting stress than did biological mothers [38]. Further, the relation between parenting role and depression was mediated by stress and perceptions of child regard. Depressed spouses demonstrate fewer positive behaviors, more negative behaviors, and poorer interpersonal functioning in their marital relationships [37], and depression is associated with a higher risk of divorce [39]. Depressed individuals demonstrate more hostility and anger toward their children as well [40]. In our study, depressive symptoms in either member of couples in stepfamilies predicted divorce at twenty-year follow-up, and were a mechanism through which poor quality marital and stepparent and parent–child relationships impacted divorce outcomes. Finally, depression mediated the effects of marital quality on divorce for wives, but not husbands.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both theory and research point to the importance of conceptualizing couple problems within the context of the entire stepfamily system. Currently, clinical interventions for couple relationship problems in the context of stepfamily living are limited [41^{*}]. Findings suggest the importance of examining the family stressors that arise within the stepfamily system, and to consider the stepfamily relationships that spillover and affect the quality of the marital dyad. Research examining family relationships as predictors of divorce in stepfamilies has tended to focus on the parents' perceptions, and inclusion of children's perceptions may increase the ability to predict divorce over the long term [42]. Reducing tension within stepparent-child relationships benefit the marital relationship and reduce the probability of marital distress and divorce.

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