Title: Cementing the stepfamily?: Biological and social parents' well-being after the birth of a common child in stepfamilies

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Extended abstract

Western countries have witnessed a growth in the instability of marriages and cohabitations over the past several decades which has been combined with high rates of re-partnering (Amato & James, 2010; Sweeney, 2010; Thomson, 2014). As the majority of relationship dissolutions involve couples with at least one minor child (de Graaf, 2008), this adult sequential monogamy has resulted in the proliferation of stepfamilies (unions of two adults with at least one child from an ex-partner). The presence of non-biologically related to one of the partners child(ren), however, does not imply the discontinuation of childbearing. In fact, a number of studies have demonstrated that the presence of children from a previous union does not supress the transition to a new birth in the current partnership (e.g., Jefferies, Berrington, & Diamond, 2000; Meggiolaro & Ongaro, 2010; Vikat, Thomson, & Hoem, 1999). As a result, we have witnessed an increase in the number of children that spend at least part of their lives in a household with a social parent and a half-sibling. A lot of the interest in these complex stepfamilies has focused on the adjustment and life-outcomes of the children raised in these partnerships with the somewhat consistent message that they fare worse off than children raised in intact families (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Of particular concern here, has also been how the addition of a half-sibling can affect the already present non-biologically related to one of the partners child. Some previous works have argued that the addition of a biologically related to both parents child does not benefit offspring from earlier unions and have thus, cautioned partners against seeing the addition of a new child as a way to "cement" the family (e.g., Stewart, 2005). What has remained unexplored however, is the impact which this fertility transition can have on the *partners*' psychological well-being (e.g., life satisfaction and happiness). Examining how individuals might experience life transitions in their repartnering unions is an essential question to address given the reported higher volatility of these partnerships (Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010). Our work addresses this gap in the literature by examining how the transition to a common child affects the well-being of both parents in a stepfamily.

In this work, we explore whether the birth of a common child in a stepfamily can have distinct effects on the well-being of the resident biological and social parents. One of the reasons postulated for why individuals have children after repartnering is that a shared child can confirm the couple's status as a family and signal the partners' commitment to each other (the so-called "commitment hypothesis"; Griffith et al., 1985; Vikat et al., 1999). This mechanism implies a positive effect of childbearing on both partners' well-being. Additionally, however, the transition to a common child can benefit the partner with the resident biological child in a rather distinct manner from the benefits that the social parent might draw. Earlier works have suggested that the addition of a biologically related infant into the stepfamily can assist the biological parent by drawing the social parent into the care for the non-biologically related offspring as well (e.g., Ivanova, Kalmijn, & Uunk, 2013). In line with this argument, some earlier works have in fact demonstrated that stepchildren receive more time and attention from their step-fathers in blended (i.e., a family which contains both biological and stepchildren) than in non-blended families to the point where the paternal investment in these children does not differ within a family (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003). On the other hand side, however, the addition of a common child in a stepfamily increases the number of parental roles which the social parent has to perform (i.e., social parent to the partner's child, as well as, a biological parent to the new child). In other words,

a fertility transition within a stepfamily increases the complexity of parental roles for one of the partners. Earlier works have demonstrated that individuals who perform a combination of parental roles score higher on measures of maladjustment such as depression (Pace & Shafer, 2015). Therefore, in our work, we expect to find that whereas the transition to a common child in a stepfamily might have a positive effect on the adjustment of the biological parent, this effect would either 1) also be positive for the the partner who had performed only the role of a social parent up until that point (in line with the arguments put forward by the commitment hypothesis) or 2) would be negative due to the increased complexity of parenting roles which is partner has to perform.

Data and measures

We use the British Household Panels Survey (BHPS), an annual panel survey consisting of a nationally representative sample of about 5,500 households recruited in 1991, containing a total of approximately 10,000 interviewed individuals. Participants are re-interviewed each successive year for 18 years and, if they split from original households to form new households, they are followed and all adult members of these households are also interviewed. Similarly, new members joining sample households become eligible for interview and children are interviewed as they reach the age of 16. The BHPS dataset is well-suited to investigating the relationship between fertility and happiness in stepfamilies because it provides information on several socio-economic factors, family structure and characteristics, fertility history, and subjective well-being measured over time.

In order to investigate the effect of having a common child on the subjective well-being of parents living in a stepfamily, we selected women and men in a stable relationship (i.e., cohabiting or married), who had a child before the start of that union. Unfortunately, in the BHPS children enter the survey as panel members only at age 16, which means that no explicit information was collected about their place of residence prior to that age. Following the strategy adopted by Ermisch and Francesconi (2000), we assume that all children lived with their mothers throughout their years of dependency. The assumption is based on the fact that around the 90% of the BHPS adolescents aged 16-17 living in a stepfamily, live with their natural mother. Similar to Ermisch and Francesconi (2000), a mother is defined to be in a stepfamily if she is cohabiting with or married to a partner who is not the biological father of at least one of her children. Our sample consists of 834 stepfamilies, among which 278 had a child during the observation period.

Parents' subjective well-being. The BHPS includes two measures of subjective well-being: life satisfaction and happiness. Life satisfaction is measured using the following question: *"How dissatisfied or satisfied are you with your life overall?"* (1 = *not satisfied at all* to 7 = *completely satisfied*). Unfortunately, this question was not asked throughout the entire survey but was rather included from wave 6 until the end of the survey (i.e., wave 18), with a gap at wave 11. The happiness variable is present in all 18 waves and it is measured using the following question: *Have you recently been feeling reasonably happy, all things considered?*" (1 = *much less happy than usual* to 4 = *happier than usual*). As already highlighted by Myrskylä and Margolis (2014), happiness and life satisfaction are highly correlated and offer comparable results. In our analyses we examine both outcomes. In future analyses, we will also include relationship satisfaction (*How dissatisfied or satisfied are you with your partner?)* as another outcome to be studied.

Type of parent. Since we assume that each dependent child lives with her/his mother, in our sample the biological parent is always the female partner, whereas the male partner is the step-father. Therefore, the step-parent variables takes value 1 for women (biological parent) and 0 for men (step-parent).

Analytical approach and preliminary findings

We use longitudinal models with couple fixed-effects to control for time-invariant couple-related, unobserved variables. By doing so, we are able to identify how happiness varies before and after the birth of the new common child for both partners (i.e., biological mother and stepfather). We include two dummy variables measuring the period pre- and post-childbearing, being the year of childbirth the reference time. In order to examine whether the natural and the step parent show different level of subjective well-being either pre- or post-childbearing, we interact the stepparent variable with these two time-related dummies. The average number of years a couple is followed is of 7.3. For now, the controls we have included in our models are age and education.

As Table 1 shows, the estimates of the two models on life satisfaction and happiness are similar. However, in the life satisfaction model the effects of our main variables of interest are not significant, likely due to lack of power (i.e., the life satisfaction variables is missing in a number of waves, leading to a reduction in number of person years available).

Focusing on the model predicting happiness, we observe a significant reduction in happiness for the stepfather (i.e. the reference category), pre- and post- childbirth (-0.341 and -0.203) compared to the year of childbearing. On the other hand, we find an overall higher happiness for the biological mother before childbirth, compared to the year of childbearing (0.09) and a small decrease in happiness after childbirth (-0.022). As the significant interactions indicate, the decrease in the mother's happiness is not as large as the one experienced by the stepfather.

At this point, the main challenge in our analyses is the overlap of the stepparent variable with the gender variable. In our subsequent analyses, we will address this shortcoming by including intact families in our sample and comparing the childbearing effect across types of families (by utilizing either a three-way interaction or a matching approach). However, we still argue that what we are observing is indeed a real "stepparent effect" rather than a gender effect. Supporting this claim are previous works (using these data) which have shown that in intact families the decline in happiness following childbearing is steeper for the mother than for the father (i.e., Myrskylä & Margolis, 2014).

Table 1. Estimates from couple, fixed-effects regression models on life satisfaction and happiness

	Model 1 Life Satisfaction	Model 2 Happiness
Biological parent (ref.: step-parent)	-0.099	-0.137***
	(0.115)	(0.047)
Period pre-childbirth	-0.386	-0.341***
	(0.291)	(0.118)
Period post-childbirth	-0.203	-0.247***
	(0.199)	(0.082)
Biological parent*pre-childbirth	0.295	0.227***
	(0.182)	(0.074)
Biological parent*post-childbirth	0.038	0.115**
	(0.122)	(0.050)
Age	-0.007	-0.004*
	(0.005)	(0.002)
Education (ref.: degree)		
2.Diploma	0.693***	0.146**
	(0.127)	(0.057)
3.Vocational or high school	0.426***	0.055
	(0.131)	(0.058)
4. Low school level	0.639***	0.005
	(0.140)	(0.061)
Constant	4.763***	3.291***
	(0.315)	(0.120)
N of couples	235	278
Person Years	2984	4546

Standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

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