

Managing the Multifather Family: Stepfathers as Father Allies

Drawing on qualitative in-depth interviews with 46 stepfathers, we explore how stepfathers characterize the biological father and their relations with him. We focus specifically on instances in which stepfathers directly and indirectly act like a father ally; that is, they presumably help the father sustain or improve his relationship with his child. Our analysis generates theoretical insights about father ally properties (development, purpose, awareness level, reciprocity routines, building trust/respect, and social capital) while discussing conditions that either facilitate (male bonding, avoiding the threshold of discomfort, stepfather's romantic relationship security, father's perceived worthiness, and having biological children) or could foster (mother as gatekeeper/mediator, quality of stepfather-child relationship) its expression. We consider how stepfathers conceptualize and display a cooperative interactive style reflecting a less traditional masculine self. Our study illustrates some of the interpersonal complexities associated with stepfamily fatherhood in the United States.

When men build and negotiate familial ties in heterosexual stepfamilies, they often simultaneously manage their lives as partners/husbands, coparents, and stepfathers. In the process, most stepfathers directly and indirectly account for the biological father, both his subjective and behavioral presence. Stepfathers' orientation toward the biological father is an important, though understudied, aspect of how a heterosexual stepfather relates to his romantic partner and her child(ren). How stepfathers manage this issue is intriguing because their stepfamily experiences involve gendered processes related to decision making and to the negotiation of their standing in the stepfamily. Aspects of the decision-making process may incorporate the power-sharing struggles of stepfathers and fathers and their relative centrality to how family decisions are made.

Stepfathers' experiences with the birth mother, child, and biological father often overlap and are developed within an "incomplete institution" in which norms are less well defined than they are in traditional families (Cherlin, 1978; MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002). Stepfathers must learn to coordinate their involvement in a preexisting *family dance* (Marsiglio, 2004a) in which women have established relationships and a family culture with their children and, in most cases, the children's biological father(s). Daily rituals and routines, special events, and common knowledge define the family dance. Consequently, stepfathers often find it challenging to navigate their place in their new families because of their outsider status and ambiguous stepfamily norms.

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Using a grounded theory approach and drawing on qualitative in-depth interviews with 46 men who were actively involved in helping raise their romantic partner's child, henceforth, referred to loosely as *stepfathers*, we explore the diverse ways these men perceive and relate to the biological father. We emphasize the social psychological process of cooperative multifather parenting or, from the *stepdad's* perspective, the process of being a *father ally* (Marsiglio, 2004a).

Because researchers to our knowledge have not systematically addressed this issue, we treat the father ally concept as a sensitizing concept without rigidly defining it (van den Hoonaard, 1997) or suggesting that it is a stagnant state. In general, our broad interpretation of alliance emphasizes parties sharing a common interest. More specifically, we develop the father ally concept as a way to capture a stepfather's conscious or unconscious expressions or gestures that could reasonably be interpreted as supportive of the father-child relationship. These efforts include a stepfather's attempt to act directly in support of the father as well as indirectly; that is, the stepfather is not clearly motivated to benefit the father overtly. Father ally expressions can be viewed as springing from a stepfather's orientation/mindset toward children and "fathering," experiences often connected to family-related activities affected by context and time.

Consistent with most researchers who explore various aspects of men's parenting (Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005), we loosely label stepfathers' involvement with stepchildren and their family-related identities as tied to the practice of fathering. These expressions can be subsumed under more general notions of parenting as particular forms of child-centered familial care for minor children. The men are embedded in gendered family institutions (Fox & Murry, 2000) that shape their heterosexual partnerships and family relations more generally. Because these conditions prompt them to speak of such concerns as breadwinning, discipline, appropriate gendered behavior with stepsons and stepdaughters, and so on, they implicitly or explicitly flag their gendered practice of being a parental figure. Moreover, the men freely invoke images of gender as relevant to how they develop, express, and negotiate their stepfather identities vis-à-vis their stepchildren and others (Marsiglio, 2004a).

Although a stepfather may do or say things with the intent of being supportive of the father-

child relationship, in specific situations, these gestures may have no demonstrable outcome for the child, father, or mother. A stepfather also may face different stepfamily scenarios as major life events occur over time (e.g., marriage, childbirth, residential move), thereby altering the way he and the father construct their relations with one another and with other family members. Birth mothers' reactions to these and other changes may mediate the formation or nature of alliances between stepfathers and biological fathers. In sum, when acting as an ally, a stepfather directly and indirectly expresses himself in ways that are likely to help the biological father sustain, and sometimes improve, his relationship with his child. A father may even unwittingly benefit from a stepfather's supportive actions.

In treating stepfathers' efforts as a father ally as our core category, we generate insights about its properties (*development, purpose, awareness level, reciprocity routines, building trust/respect, and social capital*) and discuss several conditions that facilitate this relatively uncommon orientation (*male bonding, avoiding the threshold of discomfort, stepfather's romantic relationship security, father's perceived worthiness, and having biological children*). We also speculate that some additional conditions, including the mother's mediating/gatekeeping efforts and the stepfather-child bond, may affect stepfathers' orientation toward biological fathers. Though relatively few stepfathers exert considerable effort being a father ally, many subtly express themselves in this way. Our intent is not to classify some stepfathers definitively as father allies and others as not; rather, we seek to dissect a key facet of social psychological experience. If individual stepfathers express this quality, they may do so to varying degree over time. Stepfathers also differ from each other in how intensely they express themselves as father allies. Irrespective of its prevalence or intensity, the process warrants careful study because of its potential benefit for stepchildren and its theoretical significance.

We frame our analysis by interweaving several theoretical traditions: social constructionism, symbolic interactionism, and a masculinities perspective. Initially, we discuss how fatherhood in the United States is culturally and interpersonally constructed within families where multiple adult men—who currently or previously have been romantically involved with the child's mother—negotiate their respective claims to be involved

with the child in specific ways. This discussion is set against the backdrop of how dominant patriarchal norms and gender images shape conventional family ideology, including the legitimacy of men's fatherhood claims. Institutional norms and cultural stereotypes about family and fatherhood, especially biological paternity, help define the resources men can use to manage their identities and relations in multifather contexts (Dowd, 2000; Marsiglio & Hutchinson, 2002; Rothman, 1989).

Using a symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1969), we then discuss how men subjectively and practically can manage their stepfather identities and family circumstances. Coupled with a social constructionist perspective, symbolic interactionism accentuates that men are active agents in responding to cultural images of fatherhood and coparenting. Men negotiate and produce gendered effects in their lives through interactions with their partners, the partner's children, and biological fathers.

Our research is consistent with the call for scholars to engage in theoretical analyses that explore the significance of gender in family processes, including how men do fathering (Fox & Murry, 2000; Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005). Empirically, we *selectively* illustrate how stepfathers (and fathers) "do gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987) or "practice gender" (Martin, 2003) in relation to stepfamilies. Both metaphors conceptualize gender as a socially constructed accomplishment unfolding in an interaction setting or institution—"family" in our study. When stepfathers do or practice gender, they are held accountable by others that their actions are consistent with their gender category according to some social criteria. Much of what stepfathers/fathers do when practicing gender, including actions associated with gendered institutions such as families, occurs spontaneously, reflexively, and unreflexively and has an emotive element. Stepfathers, like all gendered actors, may either conform to or resist prevailing gender expectations.

In our study, we highlight situations in which stepfathers display a cooperative multifathering style. In doing so, they challenge traditional images of masculinity-affirming fathering accomplished exclusively by one man. Some stepfathers, however, may fall in step with a traditional masculine construction by demonstrating that they are the "better man" by "allowing" the biological father some latitude in his

current relationships with his child and the mother, illustrating vividly that they have nothing to fear from the father. In other instances, men's gender constructions contribute to their inability to navigate successfully a multifather arrangement. Managing a shared father identity can produce desirable consequences for (step)children if the father is positively involved and the stepfather respects the father's place in the child's life while also treating the child in a fatherly way (White & Gilbreth, 2001).

THEORETICAL SENSITIVITY

Meanings associated with "family" and "stepfamily" are socially constructed within the larger culture (Ganong & Coleman, 1997) and negotiated by individual family members through their daily routines and border work. In the United States and elsewhere, prevailing mainstream (middle-class—especially White) norms paint family structure as nuclear, with one man being central to each family. Such norms are reinforced through social policies and institutional practices limiting stepparents' rights and obligations toward stepchildren whom they have not legally adopted (Fine, 1994; Mason, Harrison-Jay, Svare, & Wolfinger, 2002; Mason & Mauldon, 1996).

Although typical images of family in the United States portray children as having one mother and father, these images are less homogeneous today given the increasing fluidity and complexity of family structures/networks for large numbers of persons (Seltzer, 2000). The demographic variability has been accompanied by diverse cultural responses highlighting alternative visions to the nuclear family model. For example, CoMammas, an Internet-based organization advocating cooperation between birth mothers and stepmothers, provides evidence that individuals in real life are capable of advocating cooperative parenthood in stepfamilies (Oxhorn-Ringwood, Oxhorn, & Krausz, 2002). In popular culture, a slue of recent Hollywood movies and television shows, such as *Stepmom*, *Three Men and a Baby* and *Two and a Half Men*, depict cooperative scenarios involving multiple parental figures. Also, shifting cultural images of families have been formalized by a few innovative laws expanding stepparents' rights in England and in the United States (Fine, 1994; LexisNexis, 2001). These examples illustrate how various agents of social change can foster

a cultural climate for thinking about multi-father arrangements in novel ways. Ultimately, though, individuals will forge their own understandings about whether to define men as having a loosely defined paternal status while men decide whether to cooperate, compete, or ignore one another.

Men Negotiating Family Borders

Although men vary in how they construct their masculine self and practice gender within families, contributing financially and being involved in family decision making affirm an adult masculine identity for most men. Given men's competitive tendencies (Kimmel, 1994), sharing power and a sense of familial centrality with another man is inconsistent with the gendered norm of a man (not men) being head (or at least cohead—with his partner) of the household. For men, family centrality captures their degree of input in family decision making about various issues, including where families live, how and with whom family information is to be shared, how time and money are to be used, how family members are to treat one another, how children are to behave, and so on. The nature and degree of control stepfathers have in this process are likely to depend, in part, on how involved the biological father is in his child's life and how the child and birth mother perceive and treat the stepfather.

Presumably, shared fathering tends to operate best when the biological father and stepfather cooperate. How this cooperation is negotiated involves not just the men but the children's mother (and children) as well. A great deal of coordination is sometimes necessary for men to achieve a smooth transition into families in which the biological father is actively involved.

Aspects of men's gendered lives—most notably experiences with the father—shape stepfathers' border work and construction of familial "we-ness." A stepfather's readiness to nurture, protect, and provide for a stepchild as if that child were his own relates to this type of familial we-ness. Expressions of paternal claiming (Marsiglio, 2004b) are often an important aspect of a stepfather's relationship with a stepchild. Insofar as the biological father is still involved with the child, paternal claiming is presumed to have consequences for the stepfather-biological father relationship as well as the stepfather-mother relationship. The stepfather-biological father relationship may indirectly influence the coparenting experiences of the

mother and stepfather because of the unique dynamics associated with the multifather family network.

Cooperation in copaternal relations may be complicated because men are often expected to be self-reliant and projected as "go-it-alone" types. Although some stepfathers and biological fathers view one another as competitors struggling to gain the loyalty and affection of the child(ren), others develop a healthier style of shared fathering.

These gendered dynamics are often laced with a volatile mix of emotions associated with partners who uncouple and then participate in varied stepfamily scenarios. In many cases, the wife/partner's former partner, the father of her child(ren), has a regular presence and may be involved extensively with his child(ren). Another scenario is represented by the wife/partner whose previous relationship ended because of her clandestine relationship with the current stepfather. Even when the stepfather had nothing to do with the wife/partner's separation, his mere presence may remind the biological father that the child's mother has withdrawn her romantic or sexual interest and is currently involved with another man. Similarly, a stepfather may feel unease at having his partner/wife's former partner around. From the stepfather's perspective, the father may symbolize the partner/wife's shifting alliances or commitments, leading the stepfather to feel threatened by the father, viewing him with suspicion and distrust.

METHOD

Sample

Our analysis draws on audiotaped, in-depth interviews conducted with a sample of 46 men residing in Florida. Thirty-six men were interviewed in 2001 for a larger study on the social psychology of stepfathering (Marsiglio, 2004a) and 10 additional men were interviewed in 2003–2004 as part of two theoretical sampling strategies designed to gather more information about stepfathers' experiences with situated fathering (Marsiglio, 2005) and the social process of being a father ally.

Participants were recruited through announcements in a university hospital newsletter, a listserv directed at various university departments, and a local parenting magazine. Flyers were posted at a variety of sites throughout the community (e.g., community health center, fire station, homeless

shelter, and churches), and a number of participants were also recruited through word of mouth. To be included, the men had to describe themselves as being actively involved in the lives of their romantic partner's children who were 19 years or younger and living with the mother. The last five men recruited were identified as having a fair amount of civil contact with the biological father.

Our broad sample accounts for the possibility that some men can and do develop fatherlike feelings for stepchildren in settings other than the formal married stepfamily. Thirty-three participants were currently married and living with their partner, nine cohabited with their partner but were not married, and four lived in a residence separate from their partner. Six men had legally adopted the target stepchild, and several were thinking about doing so.

The sample is also varied in terms of stepfathers' age, social class, race, duration and level of relationship commitment with partner, previous/current experience with own biological children, and the target child's gender and age. The youngest man interviewed was 20 years, the oldest 54 years, and the average 36 years. Men from different social classes who worked at a range of occupations were interviewed. Consistent with this occupational diversity, 19 of the men had completed college, 16 had completed high school and had some college experience, and 11 had either completed high school and not attended college or not obtained a high school degree. Thirty-five self-identified as being White, and 10 were African American with two White and one Black men claiming some Hispanic ancestry. Twenty-seven had fathered their own biological child, and 13 were living with at least one of their biological children at the time of the interview. Of those living with biological children, four men had children with their current partner. We spoke with stepfathers of sons and daughters who were infants, toddlers, young children, and adolescents. Two men had partners who were currently pregnant with their first child together. Excluding these pregnancies, the average age of the oldest child living with the stepfather's partner was 10 years. These children were roughly 5.5 years old on average when stepfathers began their relationships with the children's mothers.

Interviews

The first author conducted 32 interviews, and three research assistants completed the remaining

14. One interviewer transcribed five interviews, but different personnel transcribed the others. Interviews lasted 90 minutes on average with a range of 45 – 150 minutes. Participants were paid \$25. Most interviews were conducted in university offices; some were conducted in a church or in the participant's office or home.

Interviews followed a semistructured interview guide. They sought to uncover how men construct, negotiate, and assign meaning to their evolving identities and life circumstances as stepfathers embedded within social settings structured by familial definitions and norms. The scope of the interview guide evolved on the basis of ongoing analysis of participants' interviews. In the initial 36 interviews, questions were asked selectively about stepfathers' perceptions of and reactions to the biological father. Subsequent interviews probed more extensively into stepfathers' perceptions about and experiences with the biological father. In general, the direction of the interviews provided men an opportunity to describe their experience with their partner and stepchild(ren) chronologically, but participants were free to move back and forth as they focused on particular issues and told their stories. Men discussed issues related to the way they navigated the terrain of stepfathering and managed their identities as men who present themselves in a fatherly way or only as an adult authority figure with limited emotional attachment to the stepchild. To minimize possible bias in choosing a "favorite" stepchild, interviewers focused men's attention on the oldest target stepchild living with the mother, but participants were free to talk about all their children (biological and step).

ANALYTIC APPROACH

Using the version of grounded theory of Strauss and Corbin (1998), the first author conducted open coding with the data while using a combination of line-by-line and paragraph coding of substantive themes. Open coding was done using the constant comparative method first described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). In LaRossa's (2005, p. 841) words:

The "basic defining rule" of constant comparison is that, while coding an indicator for a concept, one compares that indicator with previous indicators that have been coded in the same way. An indicator refers to a word, phrases, or sentences, in the materials being analyzed. A concept is a label or name associated with an indicator or indicators.

In our current analysis, we identified narrative instances reflecting the father ally concept. Consistent with the constant comparative method, the interviewing and analysis informed each other because they occurred concurrently during both data collection periods (2001 and 2003 – 2004).

The first author's previous analyses with the data collected in 2001 examined various aspects of men's social psychological experiences with becoming and being stepfathers. Although the stepfather's orientation toward the biological father was not the primary area of interest in the original project, data were identified from numerous interviews suggesting the theoretical and programmatic value of exploring more closely the interpersonal dynamics between stepfathers and biological fathers in varied stepfamily scenarios.

For the current analysis, both authors reread all transcripts and engaged in axial coding for material relevant to stepfathers' orientation toward the biological father. The second author reviewed the first author's coding for the first 41 interviews, and they independently coded the final five. The authors discussed the data and arrived at a consensus interpretation on coding. This approach strengthened the dependability of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although the first author treated the process of being a father ally as a sensitizing concept in the early stages of his larger project, the analyses here explore it essentially as a core category. Consequently, we identified some of its key properties and subcategories. Our axial coding focused on the *action/interaction strategies/routines* by which stepfathers act as an ally to the biological father, the *consequences* of this activity, and the *conditions* that might influence whether and how stepfathers orient themselves toward the biological father in a cooperative way.

Our conceptual analysis is designed to generate insights and to refine our understanding about the process by which stepfathers orient toward biological fathers, especially in ways that are likely to directly or indirectly enhance the father's relationship with his child. Thus, we discuss various issues and concepts relevant to how stepfathers and fathers interact, cooperate, and are involved with their (step)child(ren). Although our conceptual analysis focuses on some of the processual aspects of the father ally concept, we primarily address elements relevant to stepfathers who orient themselves toward the father in a supportive fashion that is likely to enhance the father-child relationship. We also consider stepfathers'

experiences whether or not the father has contact with the child because stepfathers may affect a child's familial identity and perceptions of the deceased or estranged father. Some fathers eventually reconnect with their child as well. Our results, though conceptually rich, should be viewed as a significant but first step toward deepening understanding of how stepfathers take fathers into account.

RESULTS

Stepfathers varied widely in the types of stepfamily scenarios they experienced and how they depicted their experiences with the biological father. Overall, 31 stepfathers were involved in stepfamilies in which the father still had contact with his child. Of these, eight fathers had minimal contact (e.g., occasional phone call or interaction). Among the 15 fathers with no contact with their child, the biological father was dead in two instances. In one case, the death occurred after the stepfather became involved with his stepchildren.

Although we did not attempt to quantify precisely stepfathers' level of contact with the father, we were able to differentiate several levels of contact. Overall, 15 stepfathers reported that they had had no contact with the father and 13 reported that they had minimal contact (e.g., a single introduction, a couple of phone calls). The remaining men had more significant contact with the father and can be divided into two categories. Five stepfathers indicated that they had more than minimal contact, ranging from once a month to two or three times a year. Generally speaking, this contact, sometimes relegated to special occasions, involved either sharing physical space or having brief verbal exchanges. The remaining 13 stepfathers had more regular and consistent contact with the father, often living in the same community. They typically had multiple interactions each month with the father either in person or on the phone, and they spent time together at key family, school, athletic, or community events. Many of these men conversed in a manner that could be characterized as friends chatting or, at minimum, extended practical exchanges of information about the children.

On the basis of when men met their future stepchild, we estimate that, on average, the stepfathers have either personally met or known of the fathers for 5.5 years. Nine have known the fathers for 9 years or longer and three for

more than 15 years, with a range of 4 months to 27 years. Excluding the two men who have known the father longer than 20 years, the average is 4.4 years. Stepfathers with medium or high contact have known fathers for the same length of time as stepfathers with less contact. Twenty-four men expressed at least some form of minimal support for the father (22 out of the 30 stepfamilies in which the father had contact with his child). As expected, a high percentage of men who had medium or high contact with the father displayed signs of being a father ally (15 out of 18), but 9 of the 28 stepfathers with occasional or no contact with the father also expressed themselves in this manner.

Our qualitative analysis allowed us to get a general sense of how stepfathers perceived the father. Sometimes, they viewed the father positively; other times, they had a mixed reaction; and in some cases, they detested him. When stepfathers had negative things to say about the father, they tended to describe him as lazy, criminally inclined, or hot tempered while sometimes commenting more specifically on the father's disinterest in taking an active role in their child's emotional and financial well-being. Though most stepfathers had mixed or indifferent feelings, some stepfathers were highly critical of the father (Marsiglio, 2004a). For example, Terry made his sentiment quite clear. "He's just an ugly person. I tried to speak with him and it's just impossible. He's just an ignorant redneck." Not surprisingly, then, earlier analyses with the first 36 participants revealed that many stepfathers (and birth mothers) felt that compared to the biological father, they were a noticeable improvement in their stepchildren's lives (Marsiglio, 2004a). More specifically, some stepfathers felt that they represented a more loving, involved, emotionally and financially stable, morally sound, and nonviolent alternative.

But some stepfathers characterized the relationship with the biological father in relatively positive terms; some described the father as a reasonable or good parent:

I'm real good friends with her real father. We became real close. When he left town I gave him a hug, so we [mother and stepfather] talk about him all the time. When he calls, we talk on the phone. It's real comfortable. (John, age 27)

I get along with him pretty well, the main thing is to respect him ... We're not buds, but ... I do get along with him. (Curtis, age 37)

They're on the phone several nights a week, and he (Stanley—stepson) has a very good relationship with his father. In my opinion he (stepson) has a great dad. ... His dad sees him over the summer time ... He really does make time for him. There's never a concern whether Chris [father] will be there for Stanley at all. (Neal, age 22)

The significance of the stepfather's orientation toward the biological father was made evident in a number of the early interviews; sometimes, the stepfathers spontaneously commented on the father, and in other instances, they shared stories in response to a question. Some of these exchanges provided data that were analyzed in conjunction with stepfathers' expressions of paternal claiming (Marsiglio, 2004b). Here, we focus primarily on the stepfathers who, like Curtis, reported some level of civility and cooperation toward the biological father. To varying degree, these men downplayed the competitive ethic often associated with a conventionally gendered approach to multifather contexts. Though beyond our focus here, a few men with limited or no contact with the father appeared to be open to the idea of expressing themselves as a father ally, at least in a limited way, if they had had the opportunity. For example, Harry, age 44, speaking of his 17-year-old stepdaughter says,

[she] never really knew her dad, and really even now has had no contact. ... Partly I suppose because I adopted her. But I wouldn't have stood in the way if he wanted to come back in. He was somewhat of a derelict I guess, from Jennifer's description of him. I would have monitored any kind of relationship that they would have developed.

Being a Father Ally: Properties

As noted earlier, our conceptual analysis highlights aspects of the father ally concept as a dynamic orientation/mind-set. We initially focus on six interrelated properties we identified as being meaningful to how the participants described their lives in relation to the biological father: development, purpose, awareness level, reciprocity routines, building trust/respect, and social capital.

Development. Stepfathers' relationships with the biological father evolved in various ways, and the development was sometimes affected by the stepchild's age and practical needs (e.g., school or sporting events) as well as the quality

of the birth mother's relationship with the father. Initial signs of being a father ally were sometimes apparent early on, especially prior to stepfathers and the father experiencing any confrontations over the child or the child's mother. Those who appeared supportive to a degree sometimes felt their situation with the biological father had improved with time, as everyone grew more accustomed to the multifather situation.

How a stepfather's relationship develops with the father is likely to be affected by the timing and circumstances of their meeting as well as subsequent events prompting the stepfather or father to assess one another. Sometimes, the stepfather and father knew one another prior to the stepfather ever getting involved with his stepchild. Robby, age 34, provides an intriguing example of how being a long-time friend or acquaintance can provide men a context for developing a cooperative multifather arrangement. Robby had dated his current wife, Jamie, while they were teenagers for about 6 months. She eventually married, had children with, and divorced Brad, one of Robby's long-time friends from high school. After rekindling several years ago their teenage romance, Robby became the stepfather to the children of Jamie and Brad. He describes how he manages this unusual situation.

I told him [Brad], we've been friends ever since high school. We were friends before you and Jamie got married. We were friends after you and Jamie got separated. And I said, I don't see any reason why we can't be friends now. But when we're together we don't bring up Jamie; we don't bring up the kids. There's just no reason to; unless there's a problem with one of the kids. Most of the times I let Jamie handle it because she's the mom and he's the dad. We have a pretty good relationship, not bad at all.

Here, practicing a style of resistance masculinity (Messner, 2000), Robby de-emphasizes the sexual competitiveness characteristic of traditional constructions of masculinity while privileging the children's well-being. Although Robby has been supportive of Brad's relationship with the children in various ways, his cooperation has limits. For example, Robby is unaffected by Brad's apparent envy of the relationships he has forged with the stepchildren. As Robby reasons, "I'm not going to change the way I am so that he has a better relationship. He should've thought about this years ago when they were real small and he wasn't coming over all the time." Robby's position highlights the potential complexity associ-

ated with being a father ally while trying to be a stepfather and friend.

Unlike Robby, most stepfathers learned about and were introduced to the father after they started dating the birth mother. Although it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions, it appears that the birth mother's initial and subsequent descriptions of the father colored the stepfathers' perceptions of him, as was the case with Jawson. When asked what he thought about his stepchildren's father, Matt, when they first met, he replied, "I thought he was an idiot." Jawson and his wife Pamela had discussed Matt's abusiveness and alcoholism prior to the men's first meeting, and these discussions had much to do with his initial perceptions of Matt.

Similarly, Russ' discussions with his wife have also shaped his perceptions of the father. "From my perception of him and what my wife says, I don't think he's a bad guy at all, and he pretty much means well." Birth mothers' depictions of the father often serve as the first source of information, thereby shaping stepfathers' initial stance toward him.

Purpose. Stepfathers have various reasons for acting in a way that benefits the father. The main reason appears to be to make sure that stepchildren do not suffer. This was the underlying basis for why numerous stepfathers discouraged their partners/wives from saying derogatory things about the father in front of the children. Stepfathers can also intervene by talking to a stepchild directly about the father. For instance, 35-year-old Eddie's informal alliance with Rhendy's father Dave comes into play on occasion when Dave works late and breaks his promise to pick up Rhendy at a specified time. Eddie attempts to calm Rhendy at these times and soften her frustration with her father.

I guess I kind of smooth things over for him. ... when he do bad things, whether he do it intentionally or not—I try to make him look like he—it's a mistake, nobody's perfect. ... It's okay for dad to make mistakes. He's human he doesn't know half the times I cleaned up his mess.

Whereas Eddie elsewhere admits that his intervention is more for Rhendy's benefit than for Dave, other stepfathers make a conscious effort to engage the father. Though rare, Herman provides an example in which he called the father and encouraged him to take more of an interest in his daughter.

I told him on the phone—‘look man, I don’t have a problem with you calling my house. I don’t have a problem with you coming to my house. She’s my wife now. I’m not insecure about that. I’m not insecure about anything. I want you to spend time with your children, because they’re your children.

Although this assertive strategy for giving advice to the father could be viewed as a type of traditional masculine display, it also acknowledges Herman’s willingness to share or even relinquish some of his paternal privilege that may be tied to providing his stepdaughter with a home. Herman also mentions that he is assertive with his stepdaughter, encouraging her to keep her father informed. “I make sure that she initiates with her father, let him know what’s happening with you—because you’re his daughter. One day he’s going to need you.” Here, too, Herman’s self-assured approach suggests that he is comfortable with his standing as a stepfather and willing to share paternal privileges.

For some stepfathers, the reason for being supportive of the father was self-serving. Herman’s encouragement for the father to become more involved is also a means to demonstrate his own comfort in the face of potential sexual competition while clearly marking the boundaries of access. “My wife” and “your child” grant the father access to Herman’s house and stepchildren but sets the limits there. Other stepfathers reasoned that if their stepchildren knew or perceived that they were treating the father poorly that the children would resent them. Curtis poignantly captures this notion,

If I talk bad about the kids’ father, and hate the kids’ father for this, that, or the other, then the kids’ll probably gonna end up hating me. And I love both of them as if they were my biological children so I don’t want that to happen ‘cause I’ve been with them since they’re small.

Stepfathers sometimes recognized that the strain associated with their poor relationships with the father could also adversely influence the quality of their relationship with their partner/wife, so they actively sought to avoid such difficulties.

Awareness level. This property is relevant from either the stepfather’s or father’s perspective. Although the term father ally captures the notion that some stepfathers acted in ways that directly or indirectly helped the father, stepfathers varied in how aware they were that they were helping the

father maintain whatever quality of relationship he had with his child. Most stepfathers did not spend much time thinking about their effort, they simply acted in practical ways that made sense to them. Some men actively imagined themselves in the biological father’s position, however, and attempted to act in a way they felt was respectful and helpful to the father’s paternal interests.

Those stepfathers who discouraged their partner/wife from “badmouthing” the father to the child displayed a level of awareness of their actions. A few stepfathers, such as Barry, even took it a step further. “I encouraged Lucy to try and get over her bitterness toward Sam’s new wife [woman who had adulterous relationship with Sam during Lucy’s marriage to him]. . . . And I never ever said anything about Sam in front of them [the kids]. In fact, I would say good things, even though I didn’t always think it sometimes.”

Landen recalls one practical display of being a father ally when he suggested to his cohabiting partner that they program her 4.5-year-old daughter’s personal bedroom phone so that one of the memory buttons would be assigned to the father’s telephone number. He reasoned that it would allow her to “call him whenever she wants.” This simple suggestion shows how a stepdad’s mindfulness potentially can foster private communication between a child and a father. How much the child actually uses the speed dial can be viewed as distinct from the stepfather’s perspective. By definition, the mindfulness of Barry and Landen incorporated acknowledging the father’s presence, thinking about how they could do something supportive of the father, and talking about him to the mother and children. These tasks may seem commonsensical to many, but some stepfathers have difficulty following through with them.

When considering the father ally process from the father’s perspective, the question becomes: To what extent is a father aware that the stepfather is doing something that enhances his relationship with the child and indicates a willingness to build social capital for the child? When the stepfather’s efforts are unnoticed, we can refer to him as a secret ally, similar to Eddie, as noted earlier. Otherwise, the stepfather acts as an overt father ally. Through the course of time, stepfathers often express themselves as both.

When stepfathers take a nonadversarial, friendly stance toward the father in front of the children, they can signify their willingness to act as confederates rather than competitors. Eddie

works with his stepdaughter's father and spends time with him when he comes over to the house to pick up Rhendy. Eddie refers to the biological father as a friend, although the two have not done anything together outside of these house visits and their time at work.

Within the last year we really, really become good friends.he'll come to pick Rhendy up and the football game on, we'll sit there and watch football with him if he come in on it. ... it only takes about two minutes to come pick the kid up. He'll come and stay about 30 minutes and we'll chit-chat, laugh, joke. He comes back with her, chit-chat some more, laugh, joke, and he's off. We come to work and we pass by each other, comments, little jokes, and keep going.

Although we did not interview the father, it seems reasonable to assume that the father must feel comfortable with the stepfather and appreciates the opportunity to feel comfortable in the home his daughter shares with her mother and stepfather.

Reciprocity routines. Stepfathers who expressed themselves as an ally to the father sometimes commented on the dynamics of their reciprocal exchanges with the father. This type of exchange took various forms including exchanging information about children, coordinating schedules to accommodate each other's plans, creating opportunities for the children to stay in touch with respective parties on vacations, and making statements regarding their willingness to honor each other's respective roles in the children's lives. Sometimes, these exchanges were filtered through the father's interaction with the birth mother, but stepfathers were directly involved on occasion as well.

At one point early in Curtis' marriage, the children's biological father, Terry, who was at the house to pick up the children, started arguing with Curtis' wife. Curtis was angered by this and asked Terry "firmly, but respectfully" to leave. "I certainly wasn't gonna have him to argue in front of the children . . . I didn't want that to go on in front of them." His actions toward Terry are not unique. "I even tell my wife that sometimes, you know, don't talk about the kids' father where they can hear you." Because Curtis is able to "show that kinda restraint for the kids," he felt this incident earned him some respect in Terry's eyes, and the two men have enjoyed an improving and cordial relationship since. As both an adult

and a masculine man, Curtis appears to embrace what has been called a moral imperative to protect children (McCarthy, Edwards, & Gillies, 2000).

Curtis feels that his investment in goodwill is reciprocated:

Every time I see their father he speaks to me. I saw him just a couple days ago riding down the road and he stopped and rolled his window down and hollered at me, "Hey how you doin?" "What's goin on?," so you know little things like that I kinda appreciate from him 'cause I think we can have a better relationship without being at each other throats.

We speculate that such exchanges offer men opportunities to build the foundation for greater cooperation. Although it remains unclear how routine greetings affect the father alliance, it seems reasonable to assume that men accustomed to symbolic exchanges of goodwill through waves or nods might move more easily into overt forms of cooperation. Listening to the stepfathers, we heard that a father has plenty of opportunities to ease the stepfather's transition into living in a stepfamily. Fathers can pay child support in a timely way, be consistent with scheduled visits, speak respectfully to the child and mother about the stepfather, and act cordially with the stepfather. Although some experiences cannot be reciprocated in kind, routines do emerge that recognize the reciprocal theme, such as the exchange of greetings in varied social settings. Some men are aware of their reciprocal relationship and attempt to foster it, often feeling it is in the best interest of the child(ren). This can be done through actions related to the child, but as Nathan demonstrates, sometimes reciprocity is straightforward and occurs through open, effective communication:

He and I have had some real serious talks on the phone in particular, and he's really happy that I'm in her [stepchild] life, because I'm a stable influence and he's also happy because I believe very strongly that as long as he's doing well, he needs to be involved too, that I'm never gonna try and replace him, even though he really has not raised her, he has been involved in her life and that is her biological dad.

Building respect and trust. Some stepfathers are careful about managing the borders of paternal identity. They may, for instance, make a conscious effort to avoid the label of "dad" altogether. Elsewhere (Marsiglio, 2004b), analyses

with a subset of these data showed that stepfathers act as father allies because they force their stepchildren to reserve the label “dad/daddy” (and perhaps all the corresponding social connotations) for the biological father. Because issues of loyalty and betrayal are emotionally charged, this simple act displays the stepfather’s acceptance of the biological father’s presence, place, and rights related to the child. Doing so represents an attempt to control the symbolism associated with fathering in such a way as to urge the children to be mindful of their father. In this sense, the stepfathers are negotiating their family roles while simultaneously working to ensure the child(ren)’s continued loyalty to their father. As we show below, their willingness to place significant value on biological paternity shapes many stepfathers’ experiences. Some fathers were open to being called “dad,” however, and still made a conscious effort to be respectful of the father and his paternal rights.

Part of the process of building respect and trust involves efforts to circumvent jealousy. Managing the family dance is complicated by the biological father’s previous romantic involvement with the child’s mother. Stepfathers may find themselves navigating a difficult set of circumstances if the biological father is jealous and angry about the stepfathers’ current romantic attachment to the child’s birth mother. So too, the stepfather may feel like an outsider because he entered a family that another man helped create. Although he tried to remain positive about the father’s presence, Russ expressed why he was feeling discomfort being around him shortly after Russ married. “Well, I guess the fact that my wife and him was once married and lived together ... just kind of knowing he had been with my wife before.” Stepfathers’ orientation toward gender relations, particularly the meanings they assign to sex and relationship commitments, may affect how they manage their interpersonal borders with other men who have fathered children with their partner.

The trust-building process sometimes involves a direct discussion about complex family circumstances and the need to act maturely for the sake of the children. Acting on his sense of the adult moral imperative, Robby played an active role in coordinating conversations involving both biological parents and their new spouses. His rationale for having the talks and being civil was that, “the kids don’t need to see the adults fighting. ... When me and Brad [father] are together

and Tony’s [8-year-old stepson] sitting there, he doesn’t need to see us bickering.” The talks demonstrate a commitment to the children’s well-being by shielding them from interpersonal conflict.

Trust can also emerge from decisions the stepfather makes that are interpreted by the biological father as a sign that the stepfather loves the child and is conscientious about the child’s well-being. Curtis spoke about how the father appreciated the way he acted like a responsible adult by taking his stepchildren into account when placing his cabinet of firearms in his bedroom. “He respected me on that ‘cause he don’t have any [firearms] and he knows that I have them, and I let him know that I have them, you know, outta respect that the kids are gonna be there and that’s something I feel that he needed to know.” Although Curtis’ overture did not directly improve the father’s relationship with his children, it helped solidify his relationship with the father by navigating an unspoken masculine code of respect. In turn, this gesture made it easier for them to cooperate on other matters dealing with the children.

Social capital. One of the key consequences of stepfathers being an effective father ally is that when men engage in reciprocity routines while building respect and trust for one another, they expand a child’s social capital (Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000). In particular, family-based social capital—relations grounded in trust, mutual expectations, and a sense of loyalty—between fathers/couples living in different households produces a more inclusive extended family system.

This resource can expose children to cooperative interactions between adult men and can bring closure to children’s social networks. Although nonresident fathers’ cooperative relations with birth mothers are often referenced as an important resource for their children (Amato & Rezac, 1994), supportive stepfather-father relations can be meaningful as well.

Conditions for Being a Father Ally

According to some constructions of masculinity, stepfathers and biological fathers involved with the same children and birth mother might be expected to perceive each other as competitors rather than allies. Our data show, however, that some stepfathers are willing to act, to varying

degrees, as a supportive force making the biological father's life as a father a bit easier. Several interrelated conditions appear to foster this type of orientation.

Male Bonding. Having an opportunity to develop affinity with the father in terms of shared masculine experiences (e.g., sports, military, work) provides some stepfathers the incentive to recognize a practical interpersonal connection. For some stepfathers, negative personal experiences with a family court system, particularly with regard to child support and visitation issues, help sensitize them to the father's personal struggles. Asked about how he thinks his stepchildren's father, Ken, feels about him, Simon replies.

I haven't really had that long of a conversation with him. I would like to! I really would, because, believe it or not, I probably more on his side on a lot of things than what I am on Karla's [Simon's resident partner] side. Only because I'm a male. And, y'know, I'm being taken advantage of the same way as he is. Especially as, y'know, it pertains to child support. ... Just because of the way that Florida [legal system] victimizes the male. And women, women victimize the male too. ... I feel bad for Ken because I would be in the same situation as Ken.

Simon's empathy is rooted in his gendered and cynical view of what he sees as a system biased against men. Elsewhere he mentions that he believes that men with custody of their children are far more forgiving of their former wives and noticeably less likely than women to push for child support. Thus, Simon responds to Ken's troubled financial situation and reluctance to be more involved in his children's lives as symptomatic of a more generic male response in a society in which some men find unrestricted access to their children blocked (Connell, 1995, 2000).

Avoiding the threshold of discomfort. Acting like a father ally, for the vast majority of stepfathers, does not mean that they establish or manage the same sort of interpersonal borders with the biological father as they might with a brother or best friend. The borders tend to be more restrictive and fluid, often contingent upon space, time, and frequency of interaction. It appears though that stepfathers who are not pushed beyond their emotional comfort zone are more willing to do what is necessary to support the biological father. Thus, stepfathers are likely to limit how much and what type of involvement they want to have with

the father. Sometimes, the border work may be tied more closely to the father's interactions with the child.

Curtis, who stresses elsewhere that it is important for him to respect the father, implies that his relationship with the father has been manageable to date because Curtis has not been forced to over-extend himself. "He's just not somebody that I think I can get along with. I think me and him, if we had more interaction we'd be at each others' throats. We're two different personalities." To a large extent, stepfathers can monitor how much contact they have with the father by making decisions about how to transfer children from one home to another or how long they talk to the father on the phone or whether they choose to sit with or talk to the father at a child's sporting event, and so on.

Fathers can facilitate the stepfather's tact by not violating his sense of privacy or space. Russ comments that Sam, the father of one of Russ' stepchildren, once entered his home soon after Russ married the children's mother.

I didn't really like him coming inside a whole lot. ... he just went into Samuel's [Russ's stepson] room. That's really the only time. ... I just basically talked myself into saying "Look. He's just in there to see his kid and talk to him, and that's pretty much it." ... it did make me feel a little uncomfortable. ... I didn't want myself to feel invaded. ... I didn't want to feel, kind of disrespected by him coming in. ... Now if he was like, walking around the house, and hanging out in the living room for a while, I would have definitely had to say something.

Although we do not know how Sam felt about this situation, Russ indicates that Sam now "just pulls up in the driveway," so Russ has not had to confront the challenge of dealing with Sam "invading" his domestic space. Despite his discomfort with Sam in his house, Russ suggests that he would be willing to spend time with him and his stepson in a setting outside the home.

Samuel has wanted for me and his grandfather and his dad to go fishing. I wouldn't even have a problem with that. ... It would be weird. I would be kind of awkward, but ... if that's what Samuel wants, I don't mind doing it.

Even though Russ admits that he would not push for or initiate this venture, he states that he would do it for Samuel. Presumably, had Sam pushed Russ too far with the way he dealt with Russ' privileged home space, Russ would feel

differently about sharing time with him away from the house. In some ways, Russ's concerns may reflect his approach to practicing gender by wanting to control his private home space. Russ' willingness to go to a stereotypically male-defined space in which he feels comfortable may also have gender overtones.

In contrast to Russ, Victor who adopted his wife's 12-year-old son, Kenneth Jr., about 5 years ago, was willing once to invite the boy's biological father, Kenneth Sr., his new wife, and her children to stay overnight when they were traveling through Florida. Victor's unusual gesture was facilitated by a set of circumstances allowing Victor to feel as though he had not reached his threshold of discomfort: Kenneth Sr. lived a thousand miles away, had been an emotionally and financially unreliable father, and was not perceived to be a romantic threat. Interestingly, when asked about how he would feel if Kenneth Sr. lived in the same town in the near future, Victor was quick to acknowledge that his threshold would probably change.

It might be harder for us [Victor and wife], and I might not be as easy going as I am right now. That's probably going to change everything. ... If he's coming over here, I probably wouldn't let him in my house... we're pretty lucky that there is a lot of distance.

But, when queried further, Victor implies that he is unclear about his threshold, mentioning that he does not really know how he would handle the arrangements because Kenneth Sr. is a "likeable guy ... you kind of tend to treat him like a little brother, than your wife's ex-boyfriend."

Stepfather's romantic relationship security. In general, stepfathers who are secure with their romantic relationships appear more at ease expressing themselves as father allies because they do not fear that the father will be able to rekindle his romantic relationship with the mother and reclaim his family. This condition, of course, is closely related to the threshold of discomfort condition and is subject to how stepfamilies and the various relationships evolve. Victor illustrates how stepfathers' confidence can pave the way for acting cooperatively. Victor admits to thinking about his wife having had sex before with Kenneth Sr. but he says he does not worry about things because "if you're doing the right thing and doing a good job [managing the romantic relationship], you've got nothing to worry about.

It just comes back to that every time." Jawson expresses a similar sentiment. Even though his girlfriend Pamela recently told him of a sexual advance made by her former husband, Matt, he harbors no apparent ill will. He states that Matt was not a threat to his relationship with Pamela, and although he perceives Matt to be "an idiot," Jawson still openly welcomes Matt into his home and respects his involvement in his children's lives.

Father's perceived worthiness. Many stepfathers had started to form opinions about the father as a person and parent prior to ever meeting him. These appraisals affected stepfathers' perceptions of how they wanted to take him into account as they negotiated their new stepfamily dance. If the father is perceived to have some interest in his child, most stepfathers appear willing to give him the benefit of the doubt and try to be somewhat cooperative.

Typically, stepfathers' efforts to develop a positive multifather situation and their perceptions of a father's worthiness are tied to their acknowledging the symbolic value of biological paternity. Victor, who had legally adopted his "stepson" 6 years ago, still tries to include the boy's biological father, Kenneth Sr., in his son's life. Asked why he does this, Victor responds that he looks "at it from Kenneth Jr.'s point of view and big Kenneth's point of view. I would still wanna talk to my kids every once and a while you know." Many of the stepfathers in this study expressed similar sentiment about wanting the father to be involved.

Try to, as long as they're not doing anything really negative or harming the kid, I mean, that is their father, so just kind of learn to accept that. (Russ)

I think that he needed a relationship with his father, I can't be his father, all I can be to him is uh, an adult role model. I can't fulfill that father role, not for Josh [stepson]. I'm not saying Matt [biological father] is the *greatest* role model in the world, but he [stepson] still needs to be connected with his father. (Jawson)

Although we cannot say precisely how much privileging biological paternity influences the development of father alliances, it seems to provide some men a starting point, even under circumstances in which stepfathers have formed less than favorable opinions of biological fathers.

Nevertheless, when stepfathers disagree with the father's lifestyle, they are less likely to feel compelled to be a father ally. Alan discusses how his stepson's father lives a lifestyle that tends to discourage open communication between the men. Responding to a question about what his meeting was like when he met the biological father, Alan offers, "well, it's like I never, since [my wife and I have] been married and all, I have never met him, like, and talked to him, cause he's out there, he's using drugs, hanging on the streets, all dirty, you know, so I've seen him but he don't say nothing to me and I don't say nothing to him."

Having biological children. Stepfathers who have their own children are clearly in a better position to understand how many nonresident fathers may feel about living away from their children. Not surprisingly, then, these men seem to be more capable of navigating some of the awkward moments of managing a family dance more complex than the typical coresident, two – biological parent family. Herman makes evident how his status as a nonresident father enables him to empathize and side with his stepdaughter's father:

I know how it feels when I don't have time to spend with my son. I miss him. That hurts because I don't have time, but I do have time—but he's not available to me as readily. In other words, I'm saying I don't want him [stepdaughter's father] to have to go through that. If he wants to be with his children, if he wants to see them, I encourage that.

Stepfathers did not have to have children living elsewhere to develop this type of empathy for a nonresident father. Although Emmitt had never met his 5-year-old stepson's biological father, he explains why he told his wife that it was fine for her to give the father their phone number when she and her child moved in with Emmitt.

I said yeah, because I'm all for him having communication with his father. I mean, he knows that I'm not his biological father and I wouldn't want to cut that tie, because I know how it is. I mean now like having my own, from my blood.

Even before Emmitt became a father to his own baby, he was of the mind that he should not try to restrict a biological father's relationship with his son, but it appears that his perspective was reinforced once he felt for himself what it was like to have a biological child.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our research underscores the socially constructed, dynamic, and gendered aspects of how stepfathers manage their stepfamily involvement. Although stepparents and biological parents often have detached, strained, or confrontational relationships, our analysis indicates that some stepfathers are willing and able to develop civil, productive, and sometimes friendly relationships with the biological father. These relationships are particularly intriguing because men must successfully navigate socially constructed family and gender norms that provide little support for these sorts of interpersonal ties. Some stepfathers must negotiate an acceptable sense of family wellness while adjusting to their multifather circumstances if they are to manage the family dance in a healthy way.

In recent years, we have witnessed significant changes in family culture and in the latitude of acceptable male behavior within and outside romantic relationships and families. The public has become more aware and tolerant of the diverse family forms in the social landscape, even though the nuclear, heterosexual family model remains the ideal (Acocck & Demo, 1994; Scanzoni, 2004). In addition, the culture of fatherhood (LaRossa, 1988), and to a lesser extent, the conduct of fathering (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004), has changed to embrace a more active form of male parenting sensitive to children's needs. Meanwhile, the trappings of conventional masculinity are being challenged in other domains. Typical male friendship patterns, for instance, may still be shaped by a homophobic and competitive ethos, but men's efforts to move toward more nurturing and open friendship styles are evident (de Garis, 2000; Dolgin, 2001). Men who embrace more intimate friendship styles may be better suited to manage the thorny interpersonal issues stepfamilies face when the father maintains an active presence.

Some stepfathers in our diverse sample of stepfamilies shared stories illustrating how they express a cooperative style of "cofathering" in minor as well as significant ways. They discourage others from making disparaging remarks about the father in front of children or they say nice things about the father, jump in to defend the father if circumstances call for it, give advice on how to communicate with the father, or create opportunities for the father to spend time with his child. In addition, when stepfathers are open to

discussing the father or seeing representations of his existence displayed in the household (e.g., photographs, memorabilia), they foster an environment conducive to the father maintaining healthy ties with his child or the child adjusting well to the deceased/estranged father.

Obviously, understanding stepfathers' experiences and the nuances of stepfamily dynamics requires us to look beyond stepfathers' direct support of the birth mother and stepchild. Although it may not be easy to capture precisely how the stepfather's direct and indirect support of the biological father translates into positive experiences for the stepchild, the effect of these efforts is likely to be real and, at times, potentially significant. Similarly, how a biological father responds to his child and the child's efforts to enlist his loyalty when dealing with the stepfather can indirectly affect the child and stepfather.

Our conceptual analyses generated insights about properties relevant to the stepfather-father relationship. These properties represent aspects of the process by which men express themselves as father allies (development, purpose, awareness level, reciprocity routines, building trust/respect, and social capital). They can be viewed as sensitizing concepts (van den Hoonaard, 1997) for future research on how stepfathers form and negotiate cooperative relationships with their stepchildren's father and work toward some form of multifather arrangement, including highly communicative cofathering. Additionally, we highlighted five conditions that seem to encourage stepfathers to express, to varying degrees, this uncommon orientation toward the father (male bonding, avoiding the threshold of discomfort, stepfather's romantic relationship security, father's perceived worthiness, and having biological children).

More elaborate future studies may find that additional conditions other than those described here affect stepfathers' tendencies to express themselves as father allies. Researchers should be aware of and should systematically explore these possibilities. First, some stepfathers who lived much or all their youth as stepchildren may have a unique perspective on the value of having the adult men in their life get along. Second, stepfathers with more nurturing personalities may be inclined to adopt a sensitive approach to fathering that fits well with the notion of cooperative cofathering. Third, how the mother represents and manages her past, present, and future relationship with the father of her

child(ren) could influence the stepfather's willingness to form a father alliance. For instance, if she has devoted considerable effort during or after their romantic relationship to mediating the father's relationship with his child(ren) (Smart, 1999) or acted as a gatekeeper for the nonresident father's involvement (Braver & O'Connell, 1998), the stepfather may elect to devote more effort to being a father ally. Fourth, the stepfather's type and level of commitment or closeness to the birth mother may influence this complex matrix of relations between parental figures. Stepfathers who feel closer to the birth mother may be more inclined, on average, to express themselves as father allies if encouraged by the mother. But mother-stepfather tensions could, under unique circumstances, also prompt stepfathers to align themselves more readily with the biological father's interests. Fifth, although disentangling the causal ordering of the connection may be challenging, it seems fitting to ask: Could a stepfather's closeness to a child encourage him to act as a father ally or do expressions of this sort facilitate stepfather-child bonding? In a related vein, the moral imperative some men feel as adults and as father figures to put children's needs first (McCarthy et al., 2000) could affect men's willingness to accommodate the biological father. But even when men do not embrace this moral imperative, they might still act as a father ally because they are committed to supporting their partner. In addition, one might speculate that stepfathers' length of time with stepchildren or the stepchildren's perceived vulnerability because of their young age might influence stepfathers' willingness to act as a father ally. Although our data do not address this issue directly, we found that the stepchildren of men who acted as father allies were only about a half a year older than stepchildren whose stepfathers did not relate to the father in this way. Future research might directly examine stepfathers' length of time with stepchildren as well as their perceptions of particular stepchildren's vulnerability. Sixth, the degree of similarity between the stepfather and the father in terms of race/ethnicity, social class, and age may help create affinity between them or may discourage them from building an alliance. Seventh, the father's close physical proximity may provide stepfathers with more practical opportunities to act as a father ally, but too much closeness could push stepfathers beyond their comfort zone.

Our initial attempt to ground in empirical data how some stepfathers orient themselves toward their stepchildren's father should stimulate new directions for future research. More needs to be done to explore the processual aspects of the father ally concept in order to consider whether men go through particular phases as they develop varying types of cooperative arrangements. In this context, a key question is: What types of turning points influence how these relationships evolve? Additionally, to what extent and how is the father ally process complicated in stepfamily scenarios in which the stepfather encounters multiple father figures for the same child (biological father and previous stepdad) or separate fathers for their partner's different children? This issue may become increasingly relevant for some subpopulations. In one study, 40% of mothers 30 years of age or older have children with at least two different fathers (Bendheim-Thomas Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, 2002), with some unknown but significant number of stepfathers entering the stepfamily after the woman has had children to multiple men. Research also should explore the extent to which stepfathers' willingness to become a father ally is influenced by the intersection of gender with social class standing, race/ethnicity, and age relative to the father.

The process of managing the threshold of discomfort is an important condition relevant to the dynamic aspects of being a father ally. To what extent do stepfathers' perceptions of others' expectations of them change as they win favor with the birth mother and take a more prominent place in her life? As stepfathers struggle for a central place in the stepfamily or become more entrenched, do they become more or less willing to tolerate the obnoxious father, the active father, or the intrusive father? Do some stepfathers attempt to be a father ally as part of a ploy to garner power within the stepfamily?

These questions can be addressed by focusing on stepfathers specifically, but research designs incorporating samples of stepfather-father pairs would provide unique opportunities to explore stepfather-father relations, and the father ally process in particular, from multiple perspectives. Paired samples of this sort would enable researchers to identify the gaps in how men in their respective positions as stepfathers and fathers understand each other's views about the stepfamily arrangement and how they describe changes in their orientations toward one another. In addition,

understanding the stepfather-father relationship could be enhanced by broadening the sample to include more stepfathers who were less involved with their stepchildren. Although the stepfathers in our sample varied in their level of involvement, they probably tended to be more involved and to have better relationships with their stepchildren than is the case for stepfathers in general.

Although our study represents an important first step in exploring the stepfather-father relationship, we recognize that it has several limitations. First, our approach does not directly assess other family members' perceptions. Consequently, we cannot verify whether stepfathers' views and actions helped the fathers' relationships with their children. Second, our data do not allow us to clarify how birth mothers foster, impede, or modify stepfathers' reactions to the biological father. Because mothers often act as mediators or gatekeepers for (step)father-child relations, some also are likely to influence the nature and trajectory of the relationship between a stepfather and father. Third, without fathers' narratives to complement stepfathers' stories, we cannot yet develop a highly detailed theoretical model of the stepfather-father relationship.

Unfortunately, stepfathers' relationships with fathers have received little scholarly or programmatic attention. Creative efforts to understand and improve these ties could produce desirable outcomes for children and adults. We found that some stepfathers appeared to become more mindful of their circumstances by simply completing their interview with us. As we discovered, the men varied considerably in how much thought they had given to constructing a healthy relationship with the father and how this might benefit their stepchildren. Counseling strategies and workshops targeting certain types of stepfamilies could be informed by our study's insights about stepfathers' orientation toward the father. Providing these men opportunities to hear how other men have successfully managed their multifather arrangements might offer them new ways of seeing their own circumstances and the possibilities of forging productive relationships. Initiatives should consider ways to educate men about how typical styles of male friendship can hamper men's efforts to act cooperatively in the best interests of the (step)child. Finally, lessons learned from research and programmatic initiatives targeting stepfathers may inform parallel efforts addressing the experiences of stepmothers and birth mothers with one another.

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