Stepfathers’ Affinity-Seeking With Stepchildren, Stepfather-Stepchild Relationship Quality, Marital Quality, and Stepfamily Cohesion Among Stepfathers and Mothers

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Because of the potential stepparent-stepchild relationships have for tension and conflict, clinicians have identified the development of a positive stepparent-stepchild connection as one of the major tasks of stepfamily life. Stepparents often are advised to focus initially on developing friendships with stepchildren, or seeking affinity with them, particularly early in the life of the relationship. Both family systems theory and evolutionary theory suggest that stepparents’ affinity-seeking behaviors are related to the quality and functioning of other stepfamily dyads, such as couple relationships, and the whole stepfamily. We extend prior work on stepparents’ affinity seeking by including perceptions of both members of the stepcouple about affinity seeking, stepfather-stepchild conflicts, couple relationship quality, and stepfamily cohesion. Stepparents and mothers from 234 stepcouples independently completed online surveys. After accounting for covariates (i.e., duration of mothers’ previous relationships, duration of the stepcouple relationship, focal child’s biological sex and age, number of children in the household, and mothers’ report of household income), stepfathers’ perceptions of affinity-seeking with the focal child significantly predicted both partners’ perceptions of stepfather-stepchild conflict, marital quality, marital confidence, and stepfamily cohesion. Mothers’ perceptions of stepparents’ affinity-seeking were significantly related to her marital confidence and perceptions of stepfamily cohesion. Stepfathers’ perceptions of their affinity-seeking explained more variance in stepfathers’ and mothers’ outcomes than did mothers’ perceptions. The results suggest benefits associated with stepfather affinity-seeking—less conflict with stepchildren, better couple relationships, and closer stepfamily ties. Our findings provide evidence for encouraging stepparents to focus on building affinity with stepchildren.

Keywords: affinity-seeking, family cohesion, remarriage, stepfamilies, stepfathers, stepchildren

Although the remarriage rate has fallen substantively over the past two decades (Wu, 2017), the number of stepchildren residing with a stepparent has remained relatively steady, in part because of increased cohabitation (Hemez & Manning, 2017). A large number of children in the United States reside with a stepparent and parent—2010 and 2016 Current Population Surveys reported that nearly one in 10 children (9%) resided with a stepparent at both time points (Eickmeyer, 2017). These statistics likely underreport the number of stepchildren, however, because nonresidential stepchildren were not included in these federally funded household surveys. In 2010, a Pew Social and Demographic Survey found that 13% of U.S. adults had a stepchild (Pew Research Center, 2011).

Over the past few decades, stepfamily researchers have focused much of their attention on stepparent-stepchild relationships (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Jensen & Howard, 2015), primarily because these relationships have been considered to be the source of much stress in stepfamilies (Ganong & Coleman, 2017) and because steprelationships are seen as pivotal in affecting stepchildren’s wellbeing (e.g., Jensen & Harris, 2017a, 2017b; Jensen, Lippold, Mills-Koonce, & Fosco, 2018; King, 2006) and stepfamily functioning (e.g., Browning & Artelt, 2012; Crosbie-Burnett, 1984; King, 2006). Relatively few researchers, however, have examined the processes by which stepparents positively or negatively influence stepchildren (e.g., King, Boyd, & Thorsen, 2015;...
Stepparent Relationship-Building With Stepchildren

Because stepparent-stepchild relationships can be prone to tension and conflict, clinicians have identified the development of positive stepparent-stepchild connections as a major task of stepfamily life (Browning & Artelt, 2012; Papernow, 2013). For some stepfamilies, developing emotionally close and satisfying steprelationships is not a difficult task, but for others, the creation of a close stepparent-stepchild bond is challenging (Ganong et al., 2011; Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright, & Seymour, 2010). Clinicians generally advise stepparents to focus early in the relationship on establishing a friendship with stepchildren and nurturing a close emotional connection before attempting to discipline (Papernow, 2013; Visher & Visher, 1996). Many stepparents do this without clinical assistance, but for many others, the idea of investing time and effort early in their relationships to bond with stepchildren does not occur to them, is not part of their view of how stepparents should relate to stepchildren, or is not something they have the skills to achieve (Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999).

Affinity-Seeking and Maintaining

Stepparents have been advised by some practitioners to focus initially on developing friendships with stepchildren, or seeking affinity with them, particularly early in the life of the relationship (e.g., Visher & Visher, 1996). Affinity-seeking strategies are intentional interpersonal processes engaged in by individuals who are trying to get others to like them and to feel positive emotions about them (Daly & Kreiser, 1994), whereas affinity-maintaining strategies are employed by individuals in ongoing relationships who are trying to enhance the probability that liking will continue. Affinity-seeking is a primary way by which relationships are created, and the success of affinity strategies may be evaluated by the amount of liking one person has for another (Daly & Kreiser, 1994). Although affinity-seeking has not often been investigated within families, in two qualitative studies researchers focused specifically on how stepparents build affinity with stepchildren (Ganong et al., 1999; Stern, 1982).

Stern (1982) identified stepfathers’ strategies to make friends with stepchildren and found that their affinity-seeking strategies included spending time with their stepchildren, spending money on them, teaching them skills, helping them in crises, communicating honestly with them, and accepting them. These strategies were perceived to be more effective if stepparents were receptive to stepparents’ efforts at befriending them than if they were not receptive (Stern, 1982). Stepchildren in Stern’s study affiliated with stepfathers by emulating and trusting them.

Ganong and colleagues (1999) later identified 31 strategies that stepparents used to seek and maintain affinity with stepchildren between the ages of 10 and 17. The success of these strategies depended on the interpersonal and intrapersonal contexts within which they occurred. For example, third parties (e.g., the residential parent, the nonresidential parent) were more likely to hinder stepparents’ affinity efforts than to support them, older stepchildren were more resistant to stepparents’ affinity efforts than were their younger siblings, and some stepchildren responded positively to stepparents’ affinity behaviors while others did not (Ganong et al., 1999). Stepparents fell into three styles of affinity-seeking and -maintaining: (1) continuous seekers worked at building friendships with stepchildren, which continued after remarriage, (2) early affinity seekers courted the stepchildren when courting the biological parent, but discontinued these efforts after remarriage, assuming a more parental stance (i.e., disciplining, setting rules), and (3) nonaffinity seekers never engaged in friendship-building efforts. Stepparent-stepchild relationship quality was directly related to the style of stepparents’ affinity efforts—continuous seekers had the closest bonds, and nonaffinity seekers had the most distant relationships (Ganong et al., 1999).

Other researchers have also examined aspects of stepparents’ affinity-seeking efforts with stepchildren. For instance, in a longitudinal investigation of stepfather households, stepfathers’ attempts to bond with stepchildren were often rebuffed, resulting in the gradual emotional withdrawal of stepfathers who became discouraged (Montgomery et al., 1992). In another study, stepchildren generally thought that responsibility for initiating affinity and trying to create a close bond belonged to stepparents and did not see affinity-seeking as something they should initiate (Ganong et al., 2011). Overall, stepfathers appear to have diverse experiences with seeking and maintaining a sense of friendship with their stepchildren (Jensen, 2018), the success of which may depend upon how often they engage in affinity-related behaviors, the influence of third parties, and how receptive stepchildren are to these efforts.

Affinity-Seeking, Claiming, Belonging, and Mattering

The concepts of stepparent affinity-seeking and -maintaining are different from concepts such as claiming, feelings of family belonging, or mattering. Claiming has been defined as “a state of mind and relationship orientation” that “includes emotional, psychological, practical, and often symbolic aspects of acting toward and thinking about stepchildren as their own” (Marsiglio, 2004, p. 23). Stepfather claiming of stepchildren was an “investment as a social father” that allowed a stepfather to “orient himself toward the social father” that allowed a stepfather to “orient himself toward stepfamily life” (p. 23). Some stepparents also claim their stepchildren as parents/kin (Coleman, Ganong, Russell, & Frye-Cox, 2015; Ganong, Coleman, Chapman, & Jamison, 2018). Claiming of stepkin does not necessarily imply emotional warmth and closeness, although it suggests emotional connectivity (Ganong et al., 2008; Coleman et al., 2015; Marsiglio, 2004). Individuals claimed as kin may have difficult or conflictual bonds, maybe even some emotional distance; claiming may involve relational ambivalence, including both positive and negative sentiments.

Feelings of family belonging also differ from affinity-seeking. Family belonging, defined as feeling included as part of the family unit, refers to a sense of membership in a family unit (King, Boyd, & Thorsen, 2015). Belonging has much in common conceptually with cohesion and closeness and is generally associated with having positive, close ties with the group (King, Boyd, et al., 2015). In stepfamilies, feelings of belonging encompass more than just steprelationships; biological parents, siblings, and extended kin also may contribute (King et al., 2015). Feelings of family
belonging by stepchildren may be one of the desired outcomes of stepparents who engage in affinity strategies (King, Boyd, et al., 2015).

Mattering, which refers to stepchildren’s judgments about how much their stepparents notice and are concerned about them (Schenck et al., 2009), also may be a goal of stepparents’ affinity-seeking and -maintaining. It seems probable that one motivation for a stepparent to engage in affinity strategies is to communicate to stepchildren that they matter to them. Stepchildren’s judgments about mattering to stepparents are relevant and may also be important to couple and stepfamily functioning (Schenck et al., 2009).

Affinity-Seeking, Marital Quality, and Marital Confidence

Both family systems theory and evolutionary theory suggest that stepparents’ affinity-seeking behaviors are related to the quality and functioning of other stepfamily dyads, such as couple relationships. In family systems theory, subsystems are interconnected and mutually affect each other (Bryant, Futris, Hicks, Lee, & Oshri, 2016). In stepfamilies, given the potential stress and strains of stepparent-stepchild relationships, dimensions of these subsystems may be expected to influence couple satisfaction and quality (e.g., Adler-Baeder, Robertson, & Schramm, 2010; Bryant et al., 2016; Crosbie-Burnett, 1984). Although effects between subsystems are bidirectional in family systems theory, in stepfamily research, most researchers have postulated that the stepparent-stepchild relationship is more central than the marital/couple bond, and research models typically examine stepparent-stepchild relationship influences (e.g., Bryant et al., 2016). The stepparent-stepchild bond is involuntary, unlike the adult couple bond, and the involuntary nature of the step-dyad is thought to be related to relational quality that varies widely, which in turn affects marital quality.

In this study, we propose that stepfathers’ efforts to create warm bonds of friendship with their stepchildren will positively impact the quality of the couple relationship. Affinity strategies by stepfathers may reduce conflicts with stepchildren, make it easier for mothers to stay out of the middle of negative interactions between stepfathers and stepchildren, and suggest to mothers that stepfathers are committed to the children and the marriage. Stepfathers’ affinity actions may also make coparenting with biological mothers more cooperative and satisfying, which in turn would enhance marital quality and make couples more confident about their future together (Schrodt, 2011; Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2011). Seeing partners make efforts to bond with their children may encourage biological mothers to make greater efforts to enhance marital bonds. This could result in a general lowering of household stress conducive to greater marital quality and more confidence in the couple’s abilities to resolve problems together. For many reasons, stepfathers’ affinity-seeking should be predictive of greater marital quality and confidence.

Evolutionary theory also supports the notion that stepfathers’ affinity-seeking enhances couples’ relational quality (Anderson, 2000). Although evolutionary theory proposes that stepparents have a genetic predisposition to favor their own genetic offspring over stepchildren (i.e., discriminative parental solicitude), this theory also has been proposed to explain why most stepparents do not abuse or neglect their stepchildren — stepparents are motivated to be nice to their stepchildren and invest resources in them because it enhances their likelihood of reproducing with the biological parents of the stepchildren because the parents perceive stepparents’ support of stepchildren as an investment in the couple union (Anderson, 2000).

Affinity-Seeking and Stepfamily Cohesion

Stepparents’ affinity-seeking behaviors also should affect stepparents’ and parents’ perceptions about stepfamily cohesion or feelings of closeness and mutual support (Browning & Artelt, 2012; Crosbie-Burnett, 1984; Papernow, 2013). For many of the same reasons as we propose above, stepfathers’ efforts to build friendships with stepchildren should be linked to overall family functioning, likely in the form of more cooperative step- and coparental relationships and less conflict between stepfathers and stepchildren. Each of these potential outcomes of affinity-seeking should be predictive of perceived stepfamily cohesion.

The Present Study

In this dyadic study, we examine stepfathers’ and biological mothers’ perceptions of stepfathers’ affinity seeking. It is likely that partners’ perceptions differ from each other in all families (e.g., Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2002), but these differences may be pronounced in stepfamilies because biological parents and stepparents have distinct histories with stepchildren and interact with other family members from marked perspectives (e.g., insider parent vs. outsider stepparent; Castrén & Widmer, 2015). In structurally complex families, it is important for researchers to attend to multiple individuals’ experiences to better capture family dynamics. Not only are stepfathers’ and mothers’ perspectives likely to be different, family systems theory suggests that each partner’s divergent perceptions exert influence on the other’s perceptions of outcomes. Therefore, in this study we extend prior work on stepparents’ affinity seeking by including perceptions of both members of the stepcouple, including their views about affinity seeking, stepfather-stepchild conflicts, couple relationship quality, and stepfamily cohesion.

The following hypotheses were examined in this study:

1. The frequency of stepfathers’ affinity-seeking behaviors with their stepchildren will be negatively related to stepfathers’ and mothers’ perceived conflicts between stepfathers and stepchildren.
2. The frequency of stepfathers’ affinity-seeking behaviors with their stepchildren will be positively related to the marital quality of stepfathers and mothers.
3. The frequency of stepfathers’ affinity-seeking behaviors with their stepchildren will be positively related to the marital confidence of stepfathers and mothers.
4. The frequency of stepfathers’ affinity-seeking behaviors with their stepchildren will be positively related to stepfathers’ and mothers’ perceptions of stepfamily cohesion.
Method

Data and Sample

The study was approved by the University of Missouri-Columbia Institutional Review Board (#2007933, Remarried Couple Relationships). The sample was recruited from Qualtrics panels, which consist of individuals who have agreed to respond to surveys in exchange for financial incentives. To be eligible, participants had to: (a) be married, (b) live more than half of the time with at least one child younger than 18 years of age from the mother’s previous unions, (c) be able to read and understand English, and (d) have a spouse willing to participate. The sample was limited to remarried couples to control for possible differences between cohabiting stepcouples and remarried couples in stepfamilies.

Interested individuals clicked a link to an online survey. Participants were verified through a double opt-in process and agreed to take part in the survey for an incentive equal to $11 per person that included, but was not limited to, rewards such as cash, airline miles, gift cards, redeemable points, sweepstakes entrance, and vouchers. Individuals agreed at the beginning of the survey that they would only receive compensation once both spouses completed the survey and their responses were verified. Participants were instructed to take the survey separately from their spouse and not to discuss their responses until after both had completed the survey. Volunteers were presented with a consent form that explained the general purpose of the study, their rights as research participants, and the primary researcher’s contact information. After consenting to participate in the study, participants answered a series of questions to determine their eligibility. Ineligible individuals were notified and thanked for their time. Participants who were eligible were directed to the full survey.

Two methods were used to send the survey to participants’ spouses. Initially, we asked respondents for their spouses’ e-mail addresses upon survey completion. The spouses were then emailed a unique link to the survey following the procedure described above. This two-step process made recruitment difficult, however, so we modified the procedure so that both spouses used the same unique survey link. After the first spouse consented to participate and completed the survey, they were instructed to have the second spouse begin their portion of the survey. The second spouse then consented and completed their portion of the survey. If they agreed to participate, they were directed to the survey. If the second spouse did not consent or complete the survey, the first spouse’s data were not used.

Because it was important for the respondent couples to include a stepparent of the target stepchild in the household and a biological parent of the same child, we asked the first spouse of each couple to identify as the target child the oldest child under 18 years of age residing in the household more than half of the time who was either the respondent’s child from a previous union or the respondent’s stepchild. They were asked a series of questions to help them select this child. The first spouse provided the child’s first name. Survey questions about the target child in both spouses’ surveys were then automatically populated with the child’s first name to ensure both spouses were answering questions about the same child.

We used a detailed, and thorough verification process to ensure that responses were from real couples and that both spouses took the survey for themselves, rather than one spouse completing answers for both of them. We used 13 accuracy checks that consisted of comparing participants’ responses to nuanced questions about themselves and their spouses. We initially completed accuracy checks manually and by hand to be sure that they were reliable. After vetting our accuracy checks by hand, we used automated procedures to compare and verify the accuracy of couples’ responses (e.g., years married, target child’s sex and age). Those who failed a sufficient number of our 13-point accuracy check were not compensated and their data were not used.

The final analytical sample included 238 couples, comprised of a biological mother and stepfather. As part of a larger study, stepmothers and biological fathers were recruited as well, but given their much smaller numbers (55 stepmother-father couples), we did not include them in the analyses. Nearly 51% of the focal children were female and had an average age of 11.67 years ($SD = 3.99$ years). The average number of children in households was $3.17$ ($SD = 1.40$); biological mothers reported an average of $2.52$ biological children ($SD = 1.16$) and $55$ stepchildren ($SD = 0.96$). The average duration of stepcouples’ relationships was $7.97$ years ($SD = 4.15$). In terms of household income, biological parents reported annual household income levels ranging from less than $10,000 to $100,000 or more. Modal levels of annual household income were $20,000–29,999 (14.7%) and $30,000–39,999 (14.7%), followed by $50,000–59,999 (12.6%), and $100,000 or more (10.9%).

Measures

Stepfather affinity-seeking. Stepfathers’ affinity-seeking was measured using 30 items ($\alpha = .97$) from the Stepparent Affinity-Seeking and -Maintaining Scale (Ganong, 2017), the content of which was generated from earlier qualitative work focused on stepparents’ affinity-seeking strategies (Ganong et al., 1999). Step-parents were asked to respond to items asking how frequently they engaged in various interactions with the target stepchild. Items included the following: “You express concern when [target child] has problems and disappointments,” “You teach [target child] skills,” “You say nice things about [target child] to other people in his/her presence,” and “You get involved in [target child’s] activities.” Biological mothers completed the same 30 items ($\alpha = .98$) to assess their perceptions of stepfathers’ affinity-seeking (e.g., “your spouse teaches [target child] skills”). Ordinal response options for all items ranged from 1 (“never”) to 7 (“always”). All items were coded such that higher values indicated higher levels of stepparent affinity-seeking ($M = 5.50$ for stepfathers, and $M = 5.39$ for mothers). Latent factor scores were estimated for both stepfather and biological-mother reports of stepfather affinity-seeking using methods described further below.

Stepfather-stepchild conflict. Stepfather-stepchild conflict was measured using the 8-item conflict subscale from the Child-Parent Relationship Scale (CPRS; Pianta, 1992). The items measured the degree to which a parent felt that his or her relationship with the focal child was characterized by negativity. In the case of stepfathers ($\alpha = .98$), respondents indicated how much each item-description applied to their relationship with the stepchild. Items included “[target child] and I always seem to be struggling
with each other," “[target child] is uncomfortable with physical affection or touch from me,” and “[target child] easily becomes angry with me." For biological mothers (α = .90), respondents indicated how much they perceived each item applying to the stepfather’s relationship with the focal child. Ordinal response options for all items ranged from 1 (“definitely does not apply”) to 5 (“definitely applies”). All items were coded such that higher values indicated higher levels of stepfather-stepchild conflict (M = 2.15 for stepfathers, and M = 2.02 for mothers). Latent factor scores were estimated for both stepfather and biological-mother reports of stepfather-stepchild conflict.

**Marital quality.** Marital quality was measured using six items, five of which came from the Quality Marriage Index (Nor- ton, 1983) asking respondents to indicate level of agreement with the following: “We have a good marriage,” “My relationship with my partner is stable,” “Our marriage is strong,” “My relationship with my partner makes me happy,” and “I really feel like a team with my partner.” Ordinal response options for these items ranged from 1 (“very strongly disagree”) to 7 (“very strongly agree”). The remaining item asked respondents to indicate their level of relationship happiness, ranging from 1 (“very unhappy”) to 10 (“perfectly happy”). All items were coded such that higher values indicated higher levels of marital quality, and items were asked of both stepfathers (α = .91; M = 6.05) and biological mothers (α = .92; M = 5.70). Latent factor scores were estimated for both stepfather and biological-mother reports.

**Marital confidence.** Marital confidence was measured using a 10-item instrument developed by Stanley, Hoyer, and Trathen (1994) to measure respondents’ confidence in the future of their relationship. Items included “I believe we can handle whatever conflicts will arise in the future,” “I feel good about our prospects to make this relationship work for the long haul,” “I am very confident when I think of our future together,” and “We can handle just about anything that comes our way.” Thus, whereas marital quality captured respondents’ current evaluations of the marital relationship, marital confidence captured respondents’ perceptions of the strength of the relationship moving forward. Ordinal response options ranged from 1 (“very strongly disagree”) to 7 (“very strongly agree”), and all items were coded such that higher values indicated higher levels of marital confidence (M = 6.25 for stepfathers, and M = 5.90 for mothers). Latent factor scores were estimated for both stepfather (α = .94) and biological mother (α = .95) reports of marital confidence.

**Stepfamily cohesion.** Stepfamily cohesion was measured using the 7-item cohesion subscale from the Revised Brief Family Relationships Scale (Fok, Allen, Henry, & People Awakening Team, 2014). The subscale included items such as, “In our family, we help and support each other,” “In our family, there is a feeling of togetherness,” and “My family members really support each other.” Ordinal response options ranged from 1 (“very strongly disagree”) to 7 (“very strongly agree”), and all items were coded such that higher values indicated higher levels of stepfamily cohesion. Responses were provided by both stepfathers (α = .91; M = 6.12) and mothers (α = .93; M = 5.86). Latent factor scores were estimated for both stepfather and mother reports of stepfamily cohesion.

**Covariates.** Several sociodemographic covariates were included in the analysis to further isolate the influence of stepfather affinity-seeking on stepfamily dynamics. Covariates included (a) the amount of time the focal child spent with their nonresident parent (ordinal measure, ranging from 1 [“never”] to 8 [“almost every day”]), (b) the duration of the stepcouple relationship (continuous variable measured in years), (c) focal child’s biological sex (0 = male, 1 = female), (d) focal child’s age (continuous variable measured in years), (e) number of children in the household (continuous variable), and (f) biological parent’s report of household income (ordinal measure, ranging from 1 [“less than $10,000”] to 11 [“$100,000 or more”]).

**Analysis**

To address our research hypotheses, we employed actor-partner interdependence modeling (APIM) in a structural equation modeling (SEM) framework (Cook & Kenny, 2005). APIM is suitable for handling dyadic data, which are nested and nonindependent. Moreover, APIM has the capacity to estimate associations between one dyadic member’s reports of independent and dependent variables (i.e., actor effects), as well as estimate associations between one dyadic member’s reports of an independent variable and the other dyadic member’s reports of a dependent variable (i.e., partner effects). Thus, in our model we included (a) stepfather reports of affinity-seeking and each stepfamily outcome, and (b) mother reports of stepfather affinity-seeking and each stepfamily outcome.

A preliminary model estimating the measurement and structural components together was severely underidentified and yielded model fit issues (Kline, 2011). Consequently, we partitioned the measurement and structural models, such that factor scores were estimated for each latent construct individually prior to specifying the structural model. Then, all latent factors scores were treated as observed variables in the structural model. Each measurement model yielded acceptable and significant measurement parameters (which are available upon request). Because measurement items were ordinal, we used a means- and variance-adjusted weighted least squares (WLSMV) estimator and polychoric input correlation matrix for each measurement model (Bovaird & Koziol, 2012).

After confirming that latent factor scores were not burdened by non-normality, we estimated the structural model and used a Maximum Likelihood (ML) estimator. The following criteria were specified as indicators of acceptable model fit: Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index values of .90 or higher, and a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) value of .08 or lower (West, Taylor, & Wu, 2012). Missing data were handled using full-information maximum likelihood procedures (Enders, 2010), although less than 0.1% of all data points were missing. Mplus 8.0 was used for estimating preliminary measurement models and the final structural model, whereas Stata 15.0 was used for initial data management.

**Results**

Figure 1 displays the results from the final model. The results yielded acceptable model fit, as follows: χ²(12) = 27.58, p < .01; CFI = .99; TLI = .94; and RMSEA = .074 (90% CI: .037, .110). Importantly, RMSEA values can be overestimated in the absence of very large sample sizes (Chen, Curran, Bollen, Kirby, & Paxton, 2008; Curran, Bollen, Chen, Paxton, & Kirby, 2003). Thus, we were not overly concerned that the upper-bound 90% confidence interval for the RMSEA value was above our prespecified accept-
Figure 1. Actor-partner interdependence model with stepparent and biological-parent reports of stepfamily outcomes regressed on reports of stepparent affinity-seeking. \( p < .10. \) \( * p < .01. \) \( *** p < .001. \) (SF) indicates stepparent report; (M) indicates biological-parent report. SF-SC = stepfather-stepchild. Standardized coefficients are in parentheses. Gray dashed lines indicate nonsignificant paths. Model fit indices were as follows: \( \chi^2(12) = 27.58, p < .01; \) CFI = .99; TLI = .94; RMSEA = .074 (90% CI [.037, .110]). All endogenous variables were correlated, although the parameters are not shown. Substantive variables in the model represent factor scores estimated from preliminary measurement models using a means- and variance-adjusted weighted least squares (WLSMV) estimator and polychoric correlation input matrix to account for ordinal-level scale indicators. The following covariates were included: (a) the amount of time the focal child spent with their nonresident parent, (b) duration of stepcouple relationship, (c) focal child’s biological sex, (d) focal child’s age, (e) number of children in the household, and (f) biological parent’s report of household income.
able value of .08. Overall, the model explained between 30% and 45% of the variance in stepfathers’ reports of stepfamily outcomes; the model explained between 21% and 37% of the variance in mothers’ reports of stepfamily outcomes.

**Actor Effects**

In terms of actor effects, stepfathers’ reports of stepfather affinity-seeking were negatively associated with stepfathers’ reports of stepfather-stepchild conflict ($\beta = -0.67, p < .001$); and positively associated with stepfathers’ reports of marital quality ($\beta = 0.50, p < .001$), marital confidence ($\beta = 0.46, p < .001$), and stepfamily cohesion ($\beta = 0.55, p < .001$). Mothers’ reports of stepfather affinity-seeking were positively associated with mothers’ reports of marital confidence ($\beta = 0.16, p < .05$) and stepfamily cohesion ($\beta = 0.16, p < .05$), while marginally and positively associated with marital quality ($\beta = 0.13, p < .10$).

**Partner Effects**

With respect to partner effects, stepfathers’ reports of affinity-seeking were significantly associated with all four stepfamily outcomes as reported by mothers. Specifically, stepfathers’ reports of affinity-seeking were negatively associated with mothers’ reports of stepfather-stepchild conflict ($\beta = -0.61, p < .001$); and positively associated with mothers’ reports of marital quality ($\beta = 0.37, p < .001$), marital confidence ($\beta = 0.30, p < .001$), and stepfamily cohesion ($\beta = 0.40, p < .001$). Turning to mothers’ reports of stepfather affinity-seeking, only a marginally significant and positive association was identified with respect to stepfathers’ reports of stepfamily cohesion ($\beta = 0.11, p < .10$).

**Covariates**

Some covariates were significantly associated with endogenous variables in the model. Compared to stepparents of male stepchildren, stepparents of female stepchildren reported lower levels of stepfamily cohesion ($\beta = -11.1, p < .05$), lower levels of marital conflict ($\beta = -13.1, p < .05$), and higher levels of stepfather-stepchild conflict ($\beta = 0.09, p < .05$). Compared to mothers of male children, mothers of female children also reported lower levels of stepfamily cohesion ($\beta = -11.1, p < .05$), lower levels of marital conflict ($\beta = -11.7, p < .01$), and higher levels of stepfather-stepchild conflict ($\beta = 11.1, p < .05$). The duration of the stepcouple relationship was negatively associated with stepfathers’ reports of marital quality ($\beta = -14.1, p < .05$), stepfather-stepchild conflict ($\beta = -13.1, p < .05$), and stepfamily cohesion ($\beta = -13.1, p < .05$). The duration of the stepcouple relationship was negatively associated with mothers’ reports of stepfather-stepchild conflict ($\beta = -18.1, p < .01$). Lastly, the amount of time the focal child spent with their nonresident parent was positively associated with stepfathers’ reports of stepfather-stepchild conflict ($\beta = .21, p < .001$).

**Supplemental Analyses**

To further explore the relative predictive power of stepfathers’ and mothers’ perspectives, we reestimated the model in two ways. In the first model, only stepfathers’ reports of stepfather affinity-seeking were included as a predictor. In the second model, only mothers’ reports of stepfather affinity-seeking was included as a predictor. This allowed us to assess the unique contributions of stepfathers’ and mothers’ perceptions of stepfather affinity-seeking with respect to explaining outcome variance, as indicated by R-squared values associated with each outcome variable. Then, we calculated the percentage of the total variance explained (in the full model) for each outcome that was attributable to stepfathers’ reports of stepfather affinity-seeking and mothers’ reports of stepfather affinity-seeking (see the last two columns of Table 1). These calculations indicated that stepfathers’ reports of stepfather affinity-seeking explained a notably larger amount variance in each outcome than mothers’ reports of stepfather affinity-seeking.

**Discussion**

After accounting for multiple covariates (i.e., duration of mothers’ previous couple relationship, duration of the stepcouple relationship, focal child’s biological sex, focal child’s age, number of children in the household, and mothers’ report of household income), stepfathers’ perceptions of affinity-seeking with the focal child significantly predicted both stepfathers’ and mothers’ perceptions of stepfather-stepchild conflict, marital quality, marital confidence, and stepfamily cohesion. Mothers’ perceptions of stepfathers’ affinity-seeking was significantly related to her marital confidence and her perceptions of stepfamily cohesion, and approached statistical significance for mothers’ perceptions of marital quality and stepfathers’ perceptions of stepfamily cohesion. Comparatively, stepfathers’ perceptions of their own affinity-seeking explained far more variance in stepfathers’ and mothers’ outcomes than did mothers’ perceptions of stepfather affinity-seeking.

**Affinity-Seeking and Conflict Frequency**

The hypothesis that the frequency of stepfathers’ affinity-seeking behaviors with their stepchildren would be negatively related to stepfathers’ and mothers’ perceived conflicts between stepfathers and stepchildren was supported for stepfathers and somewhat supported for mothers. As expected, efforts to get the stepchild to like them and be friends with them were related to less conflict between stepparents and stepchildren. This finding is congruent with the advice of clinicians (e.g., Browning & Artelt, 2012; Papernow, 2013; Visher & Visher, 1996) and educators (Ganong, Coleman, & Weaver, 2002) that stepparents should initially focus on creating a warm, emotionally close bond with stepchildren before attempting to discipline them.

Stepparents are often unsure about the roles they should assume when they first become part of a stepfamily system, and often “parental” (e.g., disciplinarian) roles are taken as a default. What stepparents forget is that biological parents and children typically bond when the children are infants, and parental discipline occurs later, after an attachment has been established. Stepparents probably should attempt to imitate that relational development by engaging in affinity-seeking behaviors over a considerable period of time with stepchildren before discipline. Nearly everyone has had experience making friends, so affinity-seeking strategies may be quickly “taught” to stepparents who are unsure about how to
views of stepfather affinity-seeking was significantly and uniquely both of the actors supported the hypothesis in that each spouse’s quality of stepfathers and their spouses, was mostly supported by the findings. In this actor-partner analytic model, the findings from the stepfathers and stepchildren would be positively related to the marital subsystem, mothers may observe their conflicts less often or may perceive conflicts more frequently than fathers do. Similarly, as outsiders to the stepparent-stepchild subsystem, mothers may observe their conflicts less often or may interpret conflicts differently as third parties to stepfathers’ and stepchildren’s disputes and disagreements. It is heartening, however, that stepfathers’ affinity-seeking perceptions were related to mothers’ perception of stepfather-stepchild conflicts.

It should be noted that the data for this study were cross-sectional, so we cannot draw inferences about causality. It could be that stepfathers and stepchildren experiencing less conflict—perhaps because stepchildren are well-behaved, easy-going, and receptive to the stepfather joining the family—may facilitate stepfathers’ desire to do things for and with stepchildren (i.e., seek affinity). Longitudinal investigations would be necessary to further explore the causality of affinity-seeking and conflict. For now, we can suppose that these phenomena are inversely related.

Affinity-Seeking and Marital Quality

The second hypothesis, that stepfathers’ affinity-seeking behaviors with stepchildren would be positively related to the marital quality of stepfathers and their spouses, was mostly supported by the findings. In this actor-partner analytic model, the findings from both of the actors supported the hypothesis in that each spouse’s views of stepfather affinity-seeking was significantly and uniquely related to their own marital quality judgments. In addition, there was a significant partner effect for stepfathers, whose affinity-seeking perceptions related to their spouses’ perceptions of marital quality.

Family systems theorists contend that subsystems affect other subsystems and that interactions between parts of the family system may have indirect effects on other parts of the system that are not involved in the interactions (Bryant et al., 2016). Our findings are clearly congruent with these systems assertions, as behaviors (i.e., affinity-seeking) done within the stepfather-stepchild subsystem were significantly related to husbands’ and wives’ evaluations of the couple relationship. These findings are congruent with other research on stepfamilies in which issues related to stepparent-stepchild relationships influenced marital satisfaction (e.g., Adler-Baeder et al., 2010; Bryant et al., 2016; Crosbie-Burnett, 1984).

When affinity strategies by stepfathers reduce conflicts with stepchildren, mothers may be more easily able to avoid being caught in the middle of negative interactions between stepfathers and stepchildren (Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Stepfathers’ affinity actions also may make coparenting with mothers more satisfying, which in turn may enhance marital quality (Schrodt, 2011; Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2011). Seeing stepfathers make efforts to bond with their children may encourage mothers to make greater efforts to enhance marital bonds; a general lowering of household conflict may also enhance marital quality.

Evolutionary scholars also contend that in stepfamilies, stepfathers engage in positive interactions with stepchildren to promote positive feelings toward them by mothers, which increases odds that mothers will reproduce with them (Anderson, 2000). We do not have evidence to support or refute this contention but given the findings that greater stepfather affinity-seeking is related to mothers’ marital quality, it may be plausible that higher marital quality may be conducive to greater willingness to reproduce because the mother may perceive the stepfather’s affinity behaviors as an investment in their marriage (Anderson, 2000).

Theories aside, it makes sense that mothers and stepfathers feel better about their marriages when the stepfather is positively engaged with the stepchildren, helping them with homework and other tasks, playing with them, hanging out, and enjoying time together. The stepparent-stepchild relationship is an important one for stepfamilies (Crosbie-Burnett, 1984; Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Jensen, 2018). One of the benefits of stepfathers’ affinity-seeking is that marital quality is greater the more stepfathers
“reached out” to stepchildren; this could be offered to stepparents as another motive for trying to befriend their stepchildren.

Affinity-Seeking and Marital Confidence

The findings for stepfathers’ affinity-seeking and stepfathers’ and mothers’ marital confidence were parallel to the findings on marital quality. Both actor effects were significant, and the stepfathers’ perceptions of affinity-seeking also uniquely predicted mothers’ marital confidence. The concept of marital confidence assesses the extent to which individuals feel their marriage will be strong and resilient when facing future challenges. Given the increased risk for marital dissolution in stepfamilies (particularly stepfather families; Teachman, 2008), it is valuable to recognize that stepfathers’ seeking to bond with stepchildren may enhance such feelings of confidence in themselves and their spouses. Child rearing of stepchildren, particularly discipline issues, is one of the major topics remarried couples argue about and is given as one of the main reasons for remarital dissolution (Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001; Visher & Visher, 1996). Stepfathers who are at least trying to bond with stepchildren may give both spouses confidence that the couple can weather future disagreements and problems. Affinity-seeking behaviors share evidence of motivation to make the stepfamily function effectively. Stepfathers who have figured out or learned from others that befriending their stepchildren is important, may be more attuned to relationships in general, including their marriages. Such characteristics would likely serve them well in terms of being confident about their abilities to resolve marital and family problems. These characteristics should make their spouses more confident as well. The findings of this study suggest that this could be the case.

Affinity-Seeking and Stepfamily Cohesion

The frequency of stepfathers’ affinity-seeking behaviors with their stepchildren was positively related to stepfathers’ and mothers’ perceptions of stepfamily cohesion. Both actor effects were significant; stepfathers’ perceptions of stepfather affinity-seeking predicted mothers’ perceptions of stepfamily cohesion, and mothers’ perceptions of stepfather affinity-seeking approached significance in predicting stepfathers’ perceptions of stepfamily cohesion. It appears that stepfathers’ affinity-seeking behaviors are related to perceived stepfamily closeness.

Bonding with a stepchild is related to the stepfamily feeling close and supportive. This makes logical sense, because the steprelationship is involuntary—the stepfather and stepchild are together because of their connections to the mother. They may like each other and even want to be together, but generally the impetus to forging a relationship together as steppkin is not a choice freely made. It stands to reason, therefore, that bonding efforts by stepfathers in this involuntary association with stepchildren may have positive ripple effects on the entire household. As noted earlier, the cross-sectional nature of the data prohibits causal inferences, but we can proffer likely causal processes. Clearly, longitudinal studies would be required to examine possible causal relations, but our data suggest that affinity-seeking promotes stepfamily cohesion.

We want to note that this study examines only one aspect of affinity-seeking—the frequency with which stepfathers engaged in affinity behaviors. Of course, stepfathers alone are not solely responsible for promoting positive or negative stepfamily dynamics. Other aspects of affinity-seeking, such as stepchildren’s perceptions of those behaviors, or the effects of other family members on stepparents’ affinity-seeking efforts (e.g., stepchildren, mothers, fathers, stepsiblings) were not assessed in our study but likely play a key role in these stepfamily dynamics. We also did not measure qualitative differences in affinity behaviors (e.g., doing things that matter to stepchildren, behaviors that make a bigger impact on stepchildren’s lives), but we suspect that some affinity behaviors carry more weight than others.

Future Research

Future investigations should evaluate these processes within the context of cohabiting stepfamilies. Approximately 45% of stepfamilies are formed through cohabitation, rather than through (re)marriage (Eickmeyer, 2017). Given the lack of formalized legal ties in such circumstances, it is important to evaluate whether cohabiting stepfather affinity-seeking affects stepparent-stepchild, couple, and household cohesion more, less, or the same as in remarried stepfamilies. Future research should also include stepfamily contexts marked by socioeconomic variations and multiple racial/ethnic identities to explore how these contexts matter.

Finally, this study focused on stepfathers and mothers, primarily because they are more prevalent than fathers and stepmothers, and thus it is easier to obtain a sample large enough for statistical analyses. However, stepmothers’ and stepfathers’ relationships with stepchildren are not identical (Schmeckle, 2007). It is likely that stepmothers’ affinity behaviors differ from those of stepfathers, and the effects of stepmothers’ affinity seeking also may differ. Further research is needed on stepmothers’ affinity-seeking behaviors with stepchildren. The effects of other stepfamily members on stepparents’ affinity-seeking and stepchildren’s responses also need further study; affinity-seeking occurs in a complex relational context. Stepparent affinity-seeking, though important, is not the sole determinant of stepfamily dynamics.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study are consistent with clinicians’ advice to stepparents to work at building bonds with stepchildren by having fun with them, doing activities the stepchildren enjoy, and befriending them in ways that are valued by the stepchildren (Paperow, 2013; Visher & Visher, 1996). Our data certainly suggest that there are multiple potential benefits for doing this affinity-seeking or making efforts to bond—less conflict with stepchildren, better couple relationships, and closer stepfamily ties. Although the data from this study are associational rather than causal, these affirming associations would seem to justify advising and educating stepparents to focus on affinity-building. It is noteworthy that the partners of stepparents noticed and were affected positively by stepparents’ affinity-building behaviors; this is additional justification for encouraging stepparents to try to build affinity with stepchildren.

In this study we were not able to distinguish between seeking affinity and maintaining affinity. This is not necessarily a problem because these are not different skills or activities, but rather actions performed at different periods in the relationship. In an earlier study of stepparents’ affinity activities, some stepparents engaged
in these activities prior to remarriage or cohabitation (early affinity-seeking) and discontinued them after, while other stepparents both sought and maintained affinity by continuously seeking to befriend their stepchildren (Ganong et al., 1999). Stepparent-stepchild relationships were closer for continuous affinity seekers than for other stepparents, and our findings are consistent with this finding—the more affinity efforts, the better were stepfamily relationships. The message from these studies that family life educators and family therapists could share with clients is that the more affinity-seeking behaviors by stepparents, the better for stepfamily relationships.

One problem for stepparents is that they may not know how to become friends with their stepchildren. In U.S. society, cross-generational friendships are unusual, and outside of youth organizations like scouts and sports teams, adults do not normally seek to build friendships with nonrelated children and adolescents. Moreover, stepparenthood as an incompletely institutionalized status means that many stepfathers and stepmothers are unsure of how to function in their roles, and so they often default to enacting father and mother role-sets because that is what they know about adults in households with children (Cherlin, 1978; Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Although this may be a good choice for some stepfamilies, in others it creates problems because stepparents move too quickly into disciplinary behaviors without spending time in building bonds of warmth and affection. The affinity-seeking measure used in this study contained items derived from earlier qualitative research, and this measure contains items that could be used as clues for stepparents unsure about how to build affinity. Prior research indicates that stepchildren expect stepparents to initiate efforts toward developing relationships (Ganong et al., 2011), so educating stepparents about the best approaches in forging meaningful ties with stepchildren may be a critical step in enhancing overall stepfamily wellbeing.

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