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Perceived mattering in stepfamilies: A social relations model analysis

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Abstract

The current study examined the respective role of stepfamily members' individual characteristics and their dyadic relationships in stepfamily members' perceptions of mattering to one another. Parents, stepparents, and adolescents from 86 stepfamilies participated. Applying social relations model analyses, several trends emerged regarding the relative importance of individual and dyadic factors. Parents' and adolescents' reports of mattering to one another were mainly driven by individual factors, whereas relational factors were important to understand the reports of mattering in which the stepparent was one of the dyad members. These findings contribute to stepfamily research by highlighting that stepfamily members' sense of belonging is at least partly a function of the interpersonal adaptation between the stepparent and other family members.

KEYWORDS

families, interpersonal perceptions, parenthood

1 | INTRODUCTION

Stepfamilies, "in which at least one of the adults has a child (or children) from a previous relationship" (Ganong & Coleman, 2017, p. 2), are an increasingly common family type in contemporary society (Eurostat, 2015). Recent demographic studies show that 16% of children in the United States are living with a stepparent, stepsibling, or halfsibling (Pew Research Center, 2015). Also in Europe, stepfamilies can no longer be considered the exception. For

instance, in Belgium, where the current study's sample was collected, 10% of all families are stepfamilies (Audenaert, 2018). Accordingly, a large number of studies focus on understanding the formation and maintenance of stepfamily relationships and especially the affective aspects of these family relationships such as closeness and relationship quality (e.g., Jensen & Howard, 2015; King, Thorsen, & Amato, 2014). These affective processes are positively associated with individuals' measures of well-being: stepfamily members who experience close family relationships report less stress and higher scores on well-being and adjustment scales (Amato, King, & Thorsen, 2016; Jensen, Shafer, & Holmes, 2017; Vogt Yuan & Hamilton, 2006).

When establishing and maintaining close family relationships, stepfamily members continuously influence and feel influenced by one another and thereby develop the awareness of making a difference or mattering in their family relationships (De Mol, Reijmers, Verhofstadt, & Kuczynski, 2018; Marshall, 2001). The development of perceived mattering (i.e., the perception that one is important to specific significant others) seems to be an essential part of the process of stepfamily formation and belonging (Marshall, 2001; Pylyser, Buysse, & Loeys, 2018; Schenck et al., 2009). However, to the best of our knowledge, Schenck et al. (2009) is the sole quantitative study explicitly exploring stepfamily members' sense of mattering to each other and demonstrated a negative association between adolescents' sense of mattering to their stepparent and reports of adolescents' internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors.

Given that perceived mattering can therefore be considered as a protective factor in stepfamilies, the purpose of the current study was to gain insight into the dynamic processes of perceived mattering in stepfamily relationships. In order to do so, we adopted a family systems perspective and asked adolescents, their biological parents, and stepparents from 86 Belgian stepfamily households to report on their sense of mattering to one another. In Belgium, cohabiting stepfamilies are widespread and legal cohabitation is generally perceived as a legitimate alternative to marriage (Eurostat, 2015; Sodermans, Vanassche, & Matthijs, 2013). Therefore, in our sample, both married and cohabiting stepfamily couples are included. Also, given that Belgium considers joint physical custody as the default residential model postdivorce, the majority of Belgian adolescents live a substantial amount of time with their fathers as well as their mothers postdivorce (Sodermans et al., 2013), and thus, our sample consists of father-stepmother as well as mother-stepfather households.

1.1 | Background

Perceived mattering is "the psychological tendency to evaluate the self as significant to specific other people" (Marshall, 2001, p. 474). To fully clarify this definition, perceived mattering has to be distinguished from two other concepts. First, perceived mattering is distinct from a more general feeling of mattering within society, as perceived mattering is about feeling important to specific others and emerges from repeated interactions with those specific others. An individual deduces a sense of mattering to a specific other from interpreting the quantity and quality of attentive behaviors one receives from the specific other. More specifically, in a study on parents' perceptions of mattering to their children, parents described time spent together and their children asking them for help as attentive behaviors indicating that they mattered to their children (Marshall & Lambert, 2006). Similarly, in the context of stepfamily life, joint family activities and practical or emotional support enhance feeling like a family and thus may contribute to stepfamily members' perceptions of mattering to one another (Hutchinson, Afifi, & Krause, 2007; Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright, & Seymour, 2010). Although these examples of

attentive behaviors contain positive experiences, theoretically, mattering can also be derived from negative indicators of received attention such as criticism or disagreements (Mak & Marshall, 2004; Marshall, 2001).

Second, although perceived mattering develops in relation to a specific other, perceived mattering differs from concepts that reflect the quality of a relationship such as emotional closeness. Mattering entails an individual's self-construction of one's own significance to specific others and can therefore be considered as a relational aspect of the self-concept (Marshall, 2001; Marshall, Liu, Wu, Berzonsky, & Adams, 2010). Given the fact that individuals tend to attend to behaviors of others that confirm their self-concept (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992), individuals will tend to selectively seek and recognize specific others' behaviors that verify their sense of mattering to those specific others (Mak & Marshall, 2004; Marshall, 2001).

Besides interpreting the attention one receives from specific others, individuals also derive their sense of mattering through social comparisons (Marshall, 2001). First, individuals tend to judge their importance by comparing the attention they receive from specific others with the attention these specific others direct toward other persons and/or objects in the environment. For example, parents felt they mattered less when children focused their attention on friends or television (Marshall & Lambert, 2006). In stepfamilies, the entrance of the stepparent as an additional family member may intensify this type of social comparison. For instance, children's perception of mattering to their parents may be shaped by comparing received attention from their parents with the attention parents pay to stepparents. Likewise, stepparents may draw conclusions about mattering to their partner by comparing the parent's attention toward them with the parent's paid attention toward his or her child(ren). It seems that biological parents in stepfamilies are not completely unaware of these comparison processes, as parents feeling caught between their new partner and their children has been frequently described by both stepfamily researchers and clinicians (Afifi, 2003; Papernow, 2018; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). However, from a strengths-based perspective, the entrance of a stepparent as an additional family member to whom parents and children may feel they matter can also provide support and facilitate positive stepfamily experiences and outcomes (Jensen et al., 2017; King, 2006).

Individuals tend to compare perceived attention from significant others with normative guidelines on interpersonal relationships (Marshall, 2001). Interestingly, stepfamily members often experience a lack of social guidelines and norms regarding stepfamily roles and relationships. Instead, the more well-known concept of the first-time family may put stepfamily members under pressure when comparing their actual family situation to this idealized concept of the first-time family (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Papernow, 2018). Finally, comparisons between past and present attention received from specific others may contribute to current perceptions of mattering (Marshall, 2001). Stepfamily formation may cause stepfamily members to experience a considerable contrast between past and present attention from their other family members (Jensen et al., 2017). For instance, during the period in which they live in a single-parent household, children and parents may be very attentive to one another and form close bonds, whereas the entrance of a stepparent in the family implies that how stepfamily members divide their attention will change (Afifi, 2003; Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Papernow, 2018). To conclude, this literature review shows that the family structure inherent and unique to stepfamilies creates a particularly relevant context to study stepfamily members' perceptions of mattering.

To be able to think about and adequately study these stepfamily relationships, family systems theory further inspired the current study's design. Family systems theory views families as complex and hierarchically organized systems composed of different interdependent subsystems

(Cox & Paley, 2003). In stepfamilies, the three most frequently studied subsystems are the stepparent–child relationship, the parent–child relationship, and the couple relationship (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). These subsystems are interdependent which implies that every subsystem in the stepfamily has an impact on every other subsystem and vice versa (Kelley, 1979). Recent longitudinal research has demonstrated this interdependence of subsystems regarding affective processes in stepfamilies: adolescents' close relationships with their biological mothers and the closeness between mothers and stepfathers were positively associated with adolescents' experiences of closeness with their stepfather (King, Amato, & Lindstrom, 2015; King et al., 2014).

The theoretical premise of interdependence yields two implications. First, (step)family systems are characterized by wholeness, which entails that the whole is greater than the sum of its mere parts. Thus, in order to understand perceived mattering in stepfamilies, we should take into account not only the characteristics of the individual family members but also all subsystems or interpersonal dyads between these family members that constitute the stepfamily as a holistic entity (Bowen, 1978). However, previous stepfamily studies have mostly examined the dyads that constitute the stepfamily (e.g., stepparent–child dyad, parent–child dyad, and spousal couple dyad) separately, thus focusing their research questions on the level of dyadic subsystems in the stepfamily rather than on the level of the stepfamily triad as a whole (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Bryant, 2006). Second, the concept of interdependence naturally affirms the bidirectional nature of family processes: family members serve as both sender and receiver in a continuous and reciprocal process and both parents and children are considered equally agentic, meaning that they are both capable of making sense of their family relationships (Kuczynksi & De Mol, 2015). This indicates that all family members' perspectives are important to fully understand family processes in general and perceived mattering in particular in stepfamilies; however, previous stepfamily studies have often obtained their results from the perspective of a single family member (e.g., Amato et al., 2016; Jensen et al., 2017).

1.2 | The current study

The current study aimed to grasp the complexity of perceived mattering in stepfamily triads by including two methodological strengths underpinned by the theoretical framework of family systems theory. First, the use of a round-robin design in which all stepfamily members reported on their relationships with the other participating stepfamily members recognized the bidirectional nature of family relationships and the active role both adults and children assume in those relationships. Furthermore, this round-robin design also enabled us to use the social relations model with roles (SRM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006), a conceptual and analytical model that allowed us to study perceived mattering in stepfamily triads on individual and dyadic levels of analysis simultaneously (Stas, Schönbrodt, & Loeys, 2015). The strength of the SRM is that it provides a way to separate the variance due to independent characteristics of family members from the interdependent variance that emerges as family members interact with one another (Hsiung & Bagozzi, 2003).

More specifically, the SRM states that every dyadic measurement of stepfamily members' reports of mattering to one another contains information at the individual level (i.e., actor and partner effects) and dyadic level (i.e., relationship effects; Kenny et al., 2006). On the individual level, actor effects represent each family member's general response toward all family members and thus refer to the rater's individual characteristics (e.g., I report mattering to all members of

my family). In the SRM literature, the most commonly used term is the "actor" effect; however, the alternative term "perceiver" effect is better suited to address measures of perceptions of mattering and will therefore be used throughout the paper (Kenny et al., 2006). Partner effects represent each family member's tendency to elicit certain perceptions from all family members and thus refer to the individual characteristics of the target (e.g., everyone in the family thinks that they matter to me). At the dyadic level, relationship effects refer to the unique interpersonal relationship between perceiver and target, controlling for individual characteristics of both perceiver and target (Cook, 1993; Eichelsheim, Dekovi, Buist, & Cook, 2009; Kenny et al., 2006). Relationship effects thus reflect unique characteristics of specific relationships.

Finally, the SRM is also able to estimate reciprocity, both at the individual and dyadic level (Kenny et al., 2006). At the individual level, generalized reciprocity measures whether an individual who perceives a high sense of mattering to all other family members also has family members who report high mattering to that individual, and is computed by the correlation between perceiver and partner effect of one family member. Dyadic reciprocity is estimated as the correlation of the relationship effects of two family members within the same dyad. For example, dyadic reciprocity within the stepparent–adolescent relationship would mean that the more the stepparent perceives that he or she matters to the adolescent, the more the adolescent feels he or she matters to the stepparent.

1.2.1 | Research questions

The research questions outlined below will relate to both variances and means of these SRM effects. SRM variances reflect measures of between-family differences in the SRM effects whereas SRM means describe the averages of the SRM effects (Kenny et al., 2006).

First, given that stepfamily research is dominated by studies reporting on mother-stepfather households (Jensen & Howard, 2015; Pylyser et al., 2018), we wanted to explore whether there were differences between mother-stepfather and father-stepmother households in patterns regarding SRM variances and means of perceived mattering (RQ 1). Especially regarding SRM means, we expected that mothers would perceive and elicit a higher sense of mattering from their family members than fathers (i.e., higher perceiver and partner means), because previous research has demonstrated that adolescents perceive a stronger sense of mattering to their mothers than their fathers and because the responsibility for the creation and maintenance of family relationships is culturally ascribed to mothers rather than fathers (Marshall, 2001; Weaver & Coleman, 2010).

Then, given the high degree of variability in stepfamily closeness and relationships (Amato et al., 2016; Baxter et al., 2006; Sweeney, 2010), our second research question aimed to explore the sources of variance in perceived mattering across stepfamily triads. More specifically, we wanted to determine the extent to which stepfamily members' individual characteristics on the one hand (i.e., significant perceiver and partner variances) and their unique interpersonal adjustment to each other on the other hand (i.e., significant relationship variances) contribute to the differences in perceived mattering across stepfamily triads (RQ 2). Given that perceived mattering emerges from repeated interactions and thus develops in relation to a specific other (Marshall, 2001), we expected significant relationship variances, indicating that differences in perceived mattering across stepfamilies would at least partly be due to the unique interpersonal relationships between stepfamily members. Furthermore, considering mattering as a relational aspect of the self-concept (Mak & Marshall, 2004; Marshall, 2001), we expected that individual

characteristics of stepfamily members would also determine the extent to which stepfamily members perceived they mattered to one another (i.e., significant perceiver and partner variances). More specifically, a significant stepparent perceiver variance would indicate that, in some families, stepparents feel that they matter to all of their family members whereas in other families, they do not. A significant stepparent partner variance would indicate that, in some families, all family members feel they matter to the stepparent, but in other families, they do not. In line with previous SRM family studies (Eichelsheim et al., 2009) and inspired by Schrodt, Soliz, and Braithwaite (2008) who showed that relational satisfaction in the stepfamily triad is mainly dependent on the unique dyadic adjustment between stepparents and their other family members, we expected that the contribution of relationship variance would be especially important in relationships in which the stepparent was involved.

The third research question was related to the SRM means, and compared stepfamily members with one another: are there differences in the degree to which family members of the stepfamily triad, on average, perceive and elicit mattering (RQ 3)? Given their central position (Weaver & Coleman, 2010), we hypothesized that, on average, biological parents would perceive and elicit more feelings of mattering than stepparents and adolescents in the stepfamily.

Our final research question concerned whether perceived mattering in stepfamily triads is reciprocal at the individual and/or dyadic level (RQ 4). We expected to find strong and positive reciprocal processes, as mattering represents the affective domain of family relationships and the development of liking and interpersonal mattering was found to be reciprocal in stepparent–child relationships (Eichelsheim et al., 2009; Pylyser et al., 2018).

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Participants

The sample included a total of 86 stepfamily triads consisting of a parent, stepparent, and adolescent (N = 258). Inclusion criteria for this study were being a stepfamily headed by a different-gender couple with whom at least one child of one of the partners between the ages of 11 and 20 lived regularly. This age range was chosen to guarantee that children were cognitively able to complete the questionnaire while they were still living with the participating parent for at least half of the time. Living in a more complex stepfamily with step- or halfsiblings was not considered an exclusion criterion as long as the participating stepfamily triad met the stipulated inclusion criteria. If there was more than one adolescent in the stepfamily who met the inclusion criteria, the family members decided who would participate. Families were recruited by a team of research assistants by means of a network-sampling technique. Each research assistant recruited stepfamilies in his or her own vicinity (e.g., friends, family, and colleagues) and each participant was requested to introduce the study to other potentially interested stepfamilies. Social media and advertisements in papers and magazines were used as additional recruitment strategies.

Of the total sample of 86 stepfamilies, 69% (n = 59) were mother-stepfather families. The majority of the stepfamily couples were cohabiting (n = 60), 26 stepfamily couples were remarried. Seventy-three percent of the families were complex stepfamilies in which adolescents lived with step- or halfsiblings. Overall, the average relationship duration of the stepfamily couples was 3.90 years (SD = 3.12) ranging from 1 to 12 years. More specifically, the average relationship duration of married and cohabiting couples was 5.70 years (SD = 3.07) and 3.14 years

(*SD* = 2.84) respectively. All participating stepfamily triads were living in Flanders, the Dutch speaking region of Belgium. Parents' mean age was 43.38 years (*SD* = 5.00; range: 29–55) and stepparents' was 42.55 years (*SD* = 7.88; range: 24–67). For parents, the highest level of education ranged from primary education (1%) and high school (31%) to a master's degree (21%), although the majority had completed a bachelor's degree (47%). For stepparents, the highest level of education ranged from primary education (2%), high school (43%), a bachelor's degree (36%) to a master's degree (19%). The majority of parents (64%) and stepparents (81%) had a full-time job.

Adolescents included 34 males and 52 females, their mean age was 15.44 years (*SD* = 1.87; range: 11–20). Adolescents' current educational level was sixth grade of primary school (4%), vocational high school (14%), technical high school (26%), general high school (51%), or higher education (5%). The majority of adolescents in our sample (64%) were living roughly half of the time with the participating parent, whereas 36% were mostly or always living with the participating parent.

2.2 | Procedures

Family members who expressed an interest in participating were given an information letter with a standard description about the goals and procedures of the study. The family member via whom we recruited was asked to give this information letter to their other family members. When they agreed to participate in the research, each family member was sent an email invitation with a personal code and hyperlink to the online questionnaire. Research assistants emphasized the importance of independently completing the questionnaire to all participating family members. Informed consents were obtained from all three participating family members. Regarding the adolescents' participation, informed consent was given by the biological parent and the adolescents themselves. After providing their informed consent, each family member was able to complete his or her own questionnaire. In addition to perceived mattering, stepfamily members' questionnaires also assessed their perceptions of being influenced by one another. Identical questionnaires were filled out by adults and adolescents to enable the application of a round-robin design. Family members participated on a volunteer basis and could withdraw from the study at any time. The study was approved by the ethical committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Ghent University, Belgium.

2.3 | Measures

2.3.1 | Perceived mattering

Each participating family member separately rated the degree of perceived mattering to their two other family members by completing a modified version of the Mattering to Others Questionnaire (MTOQ; Marshall, 2001). The adapted scale comprises four items per relationship which are rated on a response scale from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 5 (*totally agree*). For instance, regarding the adolescent–stepparent relationship, the items of the MTOQ are "I am important to my stepparent"; "My stepparent misses me when I am away"; "My stepparent respects me" and "I matter to my stepparent." Measures were administered in Dutch. Scores on the MTOQ were calculated by taking the mean of the scores on the four items per relationship and

therefore ranged from 1 to 5. The higher the score, the more the participant felt he/she mattered to the target family member. In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha for perceived mattering were good to excellent, ranging from .86 to .93.

Furthermore, each participant's survey contained demographic questions in order to be able to describe the sample and to ensure that the inclusion criteria were met.

2.4 | Data analysis

In order to examine how much of the total variance in perceived mattering in stepfamily relationships was due to perceiver, partner, or relationship effects, an SRM analysis was conducted (Kenny et al., 2006). In our stepfamily triads, the round-robin design with specified roles produced six dyadic measurements (X_{ij}) in which i and j may refer to the parent (P), the stepparent (S), or the adolescent (A). Self-ratings ($i = j$) were not considered in the model. By approaching the SRM analysis as a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), the triad SRM decomposed each dyadic measurement into three latent variables: a perceiver effect, a partner effect, and a relationship effect. Thus, the observed dyadic measurements were treated as dependent variables and the SRM effects were specified as latent variables predicting the observed dyadic measurements (see Figure 1). For example, the dyadic measurement of the parents' sense of mattering to the stepparent (X_{PS}) was forced to load on the respective SRM factors: the parent perceiver effect, the stepparent partner effect, and the parent–stepparent relationship effect. In the SRM analysis, the factor loadings between the dyadic measurements and SRM effects were all fixed to one so that the factor variances were estimated. Some SRM effects were related through patterns of generalized and dyadic reciprocity. Figure 1 illustrates these two types of reciprocity by two-headed arrows. When a CFA is fitted to a small sample, Heywood cases (i.e., negative variances) may occur. If negative variances occurred in our SRM, these were set to zero (Cook, 1993).

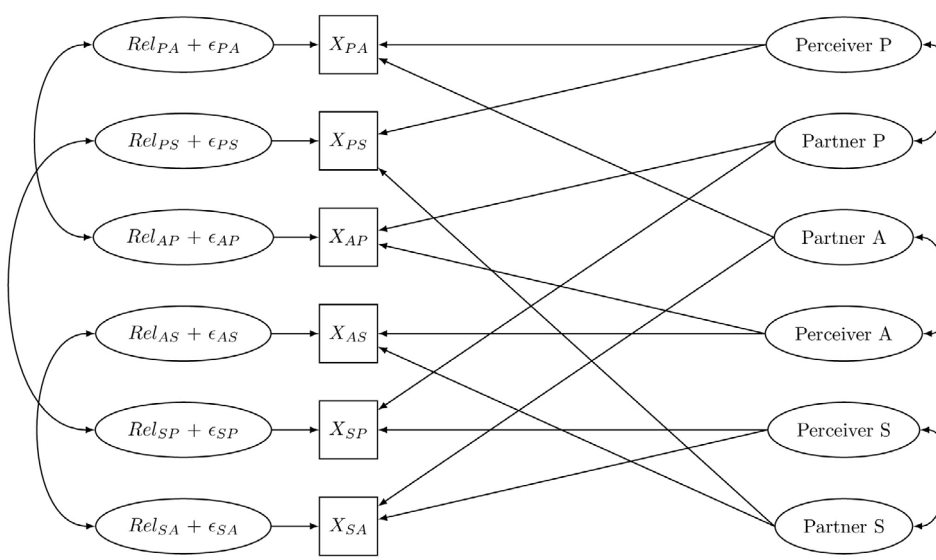

FIGURE 1 The family social relations model of perceived mattering in stepfamily triads (A, adolescent; P, parent; Rel, relationship factor; S, stepparent)

It is important to note that with only one indicator or observation per dyadic measurement, relationship variance could not be separated from error variance, as separation of these effects requires at least two indicators for each dyadic measurement of perceived mattering (Kenny et al., 2006). In relatively small sample sizes, the use of two indicators often results in unstable and unreliable estimates of the SRM components (Stas et al., 2015). This can, for example, be observed by an increasing number of Heywood cases. Therefore, we chose to report the results of our SRM with only one indicator implying that relationship effects may be systematically overestimated and thus should be viewed cautiously. However, to overcome this limitation, we performed an additional SRM analysis with two parcels for each dyadic measurement of perceived mattering, which were created by randomly splitting the scale of perceived mattering in half. That way, we were able to determine whether a consistent pattern would emerge across models which would strengthen the credibility of our findings.

Besides (co)variances, our SRM analysis also entailed means. Adding a structured mean analysis allowed us to compute the averages of the SRM effects. However, in our triad SRM, there were a total of 13 SRM means (one family mean, three perceiver means, three partner means, and six relationship means), but only six means were observed. Consequently, to identify the model, restrictions were needed on the mean structure. The family mean represented the average over the six dyadic measurements. Restrictions were then applied such that the mean perceiver effects summed to zero, the mean partner effects summed to zero, and also the mean SRM relationship effects summed to zero for a given perceiver or partner. Both the mean perceiver and partner effects could thus be understood as deviations from the overall family mean.

Furthermore, to test differences between mother-stepfather and father-stepmother families, an SRM group analysis was conducted. To test whether the sets of specific parameters (SRM means or (co)variances) differed between the two groups, two consecutive nested tests, in accordance to the classification of Meredith (1993) for levels of measurement invariance, were performed. First, the unconstrained model in which all SRM variances and means were allowed to vary across the two groups was compared with a model in which SRM means were set to be equal across the groups. To evaluate whether setting these parameters equal significantly worsened the fit of the model, a χ^2 difference test was used. In the second nested test, we compared the model in which only the SRM (co)variances were allowed to vary across the two groups with the more constrained model in which these SRM (co)variances were also set to be equal. Again, a χ^2 difference test was used to evaluate whether these constraints worsened the fit of the model.

Model fit was evaluated with the χ^2 goodness-of-fit test, which assesses the ability of the model to reproduce the observed covariance matrix. A significant χ^2 test indicates significant differences between the predicted and observed covariance matrix and thus implies a bad fit. However, because of this test's sensitivity to the sample size, the comparative fit index (CFI) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) were also assessed to evaluate model fit. Values greater than .95 for the CFI and RMSEA values lower than .05 indicate a good model fit (Kline, 2011). Finally, all analyses were performed in R (R Development Core Team, 2017) using the SEM-package lavaan (Rosseel, 2012).

3 | RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for the reported scores of perceived mattering, including means, standard deviations, and correlations, are depicted in Table 1. Adolescent boys and girls did not differ in

TABLE 1 Means (*M*), *SD*, and correlations of dyadic measurements ($N = 86$ stepfamilies)

Relationship	*M* (*SD*)	P-S	P-A	S-P	S-A	A-P
P-S	4.47 (.72)					
P-A	4.32 (.64)	.36***				
S-P	4.38 (.65)	.34**	.30**			
S-A	3.46 (1.01)	.27*	.47***	.39***		
A-P	4.51 (.59)	.07	.40***	.15	.15	
B-P	4.56 (.50)					
G-P	4.47 (.65)					
A-S	3.81 (.93)	.21*	.27*	.18	.28**	.56***
B-S	3.86 (.95)					
G-S	3.75 (.91)					

Abbreviations: A, adolescent; B, boys; G, girls; P, parent; P-S, parent rating stepparent; S, stepparent.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

their perceptions of mattering to their parents ($t[81.80] = 0.74$, $p = .46$) or their stepparents ($t[68.19] = 0.55$, $p = .59$). As expected, no differences in mattering scores were found between married and cohabiting stepfamily triads. Accordingly, perceptions of mattering did not differ between stepfamily triads in which the adolescent lived part-time or full-time. Furthermore, stepfamily couples' average relationship duration was only significantly correlated with stepparents' reports of mattering to the biological parent ($r = .22$, $p = .04$).

3.1 | Social relations model analysis

3.1.1 | Perceived mattering in mother-stepfather and father-stepmother families (RQ 1)

First, the comparison of the unconstrained group model with the group model in which SRM means across the two types of stepfamilies were set to be equal revealed that setting these SRM means as equal across mother-stepfather and father-stepmother families did not significantly worsen the fit of the SRM ($\chi^2_{\text{difference}}[6] = 2.08$; $p = .91$). This means that there were no significant differences between mother-stepfather and father-stepmother families with respect to the SRM means of perceived mattering. However, when we additionally compared this model with the more constrained model in which not only SRM means but also SRM (co)variances were set to be equal, the fit significantly worsened ($\chi^2_{\text{difference}}[18] = 30.61$; $p = .03$). This indicates that the variance in perceived mattering in mother-stepfather and father-stepmother triads was driven by different SRM effects.

Assuming the model had partial measurement invariance, we tested these differences in SRM variances between the two stepfamily types separately. This revealed that only the biological parent's perceiver variance significantly differed between mother-stepfather and father-stepmother families ($\delta = .35$; $p < .01$). Consequently, in our final SRM group model only the biological parent's perceiver variance and the covariance between the biological parent's perceiver and partner effect were allowed to vary between the two groups. Initially, we included

two covariates in the analytical design: adolescent's gender and number of years lived in the stepfamily. However, none of the regressions of SRM means on these covariates were significant, and therefore, we did not include these covariates in our final model. After setting the negative adolescent–parent relationship variance and its accompanying covariance to zero, the final SRM for perceived mattering yielded good fit indices: $\chi^2(30) = 32.025$ ($p = .37$), CFI = .98, and RMSEA = .04.

3.1.2 | The relative contribution of stepfamily members' individual characteristics and their dyadic relationships to perceived mattering (RQ 2)

Table 2 shows how the biological parent's perceiver variance for mattering significantly differed between mother-stepfather and father-stepmother families. More specifically, the biological parent's perceiver variance was only statistically significant in father-stepmother families, indicating that across stepfamilies only fathers but not mothers varied in the way they perceived mattering to both their partner and their child. Furthermore, stepparent's and adolescent's perceiver variances were significant, demonstrating that stepparents and adolescents in some families reported higher feelings of mattering than stepparents and adolescents in other families.

Additionally, not only stepparent's and adolescent's perceiver variances but also their partner variances differed significantly from zero, suggesting that the extent to which stepparents and adolescents elicited higher reports of mattering also varied across stepfamilies. Thus, stepparents' and adolescents' individual characteristics not only affected the way they felt they

TABLE 2 Social relations model (SRM) variance estimates for perceived mattering

SRM component	Mattering
Perceiver	
Parent	
Mother	.062
Father	.329**
Stepparent	.210**
Adolescent	.302***
Partner	
Parent	.052
Stepparent	.125*
Adolescent	.230***
Relationship	
Parent–stepparent	.229**
Parent–adolescent	.015
Stepparent–parent	.142*
Stepparent–adolescent	.517***
Adolescent–parent	.000
Adolescent–stepparent	.432***

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

mattered to their other family members but also the degree to which they were able to elicit feelings of mattering from their other family members. The partner variance of the biological parent was nonsignificant, indicating that, across families, biological parents were perceived in a similar way by their other family members.

All relationship variances of the relationships in which the stepparent was involved as perceiver or target were significant, indicating that the extent to which the stepparent perceived or elicited mattering from the other stepfamily members was dependent on the unique relationship between the stepparent and the other stepfamily members. However, the parent–adolescent relationship variances in both directions were not significant, suggesting that the way the biological parent and adolescent felt they mattered to each other was not dependent on their unique dyadic adjustment.

Although the results above clarified that, overall, stepfamily members' individual characteristics on the one hand and their unique interpersonal relationships on the other hand significantly contributed to their perceptions of mattering to one another, the exact contribution or relative importance of each SRM component to explain variance in specific stepfamily relationships remained unclear. Therefore, in order to provide a more comprehensive answer to the second research question, we calculated the percentage of variance in the observed dyadic measurements accounted for by each of the SRM components (Kenny et al., 2006). For each dyadic measurement, the relative importance of the relevant SRM effects can be obtained by dividing each estimated variance by the total of the three estimated variances. Figure 2 presents the relative importance (RI) of the SRM components to the variance in the stepfamily relationships.

One of the most striking patterns in Figure 2 is that relationship-specific factors substantially contributed to stepparents' and adolescents' perceptions of mattering to each other (50–54%) whereas felt mattering between biological parents and adolescents was almost entirely driven by individual characteristics, especially those of the adolescent. More specifically, individual characteristics of the adolescent explained 85% of the total variance in their perceptions of mattering to their biological parent, and 40 and 75% of the total variance in their fathers' and mothers' perceptions of mattering to them, respectively. In the couple relationship, especially stepparents' individual characteristics (51%) and also factors unique to the relationship (35%) contributed to stepparents' felt mattering to the parent and a similar pattern was found

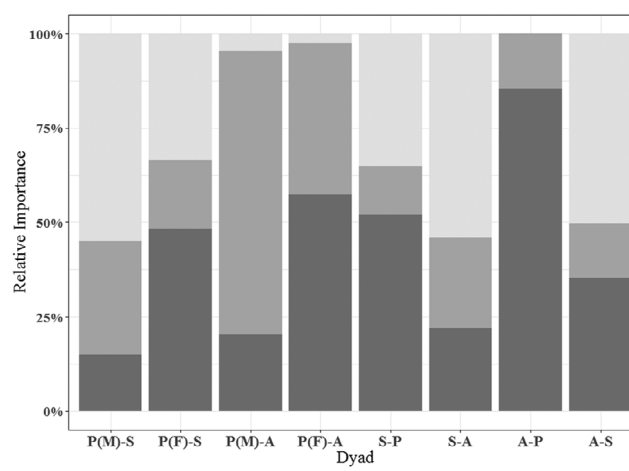

FIGURE 2 Relative importance (RI) of social relations model (SRM) components to the total variance of each dyadic measurement of interpersonal mattering. (Dark gray = perceiver; gray = partner; light gray = relationship + residual; A, adolescent; F, father; M, mother; P, parent; S, stepparent)

regarding fathers' felt mattering to their partner: 48% of that variance was explained by fathers' individual characteristics and 33% by factors unique to the relationship between father and stepmother. Conversely, when it came to mothers' perceptions of mattering to their partner, mothers' individual characteristics (15%) were less important than relationship-specific factors within the parent–stepparent relationship (55%).

To strengthen the validity of our findings based on an SRM analysis with one indicator, we performed an additional SRM analysis in which two parcels were specified. As expected, more Heywood cases occurred in this more complex model. However, the results indicated the same trends regarding the RI of the SRM components to the variance in perceived mattering across stepfamily triads. For instance, relationship effects contributed more to the total variance in the stepparent–adolescent relationship ($RI_{\text{Rel S-A}} = 41\%$) and the adolescent–stepparent relationship ($RI_{\text{Rel A-S}} = 33\%$) than in the parent–child relationship, in which the contribution of relationship factors remained negligible in both directions ($RI_{\text{Rel A-P}} = RI_{\text{Rel P-A}} = 0\%$). This consistent pattern across models strengthens our confidence in the validity of the current study's findings.

Thus, overall, Figure 2 shows that the RI of stepfamily members' individual characteristics and their unique dyadic adjustment to perceptions of mattering was dependent on the relationship in focus.

3.1.3 | Differences between stepfamily members in perceiving and eliciting mattering (RQ 3)

Table 3 shows the estimated SRM means for stepfamily members, which compare family members with one another. The family effect is the only SRM effect with its score in the original scale. Thus, overall, the family effect suggested that stepfamilies in our study reported high levels of perceived mattering ($M = 4.16$). Regarding the perceiver and partner effects, the SRM means represent the relative estimates compared to the average family member. As hypothesized, biological parents perceived ($M = 0.53$) and elicited ($M = 0.55$) more mattering from others than the average family member in the stepfamily triad did. On average, stepparents perceived 0.34 points less mattering than the average family member did. Other family members felt that they mattered the least to the adolescent: adolescents elicited 0.36 points less mattering from their other family members in the stepfamily triad than the average family member did.

TABLE 3 Social relations model (SRM) mean estimates for perceived mattering

SRM component	Mattering (*M*)
Family	4.16***
Perceiver	
Parent	.53***
Stepparent	−.34***
Adolescent	−.19*
Partner	
Parent	.55***
Stepparent	−.19***
Adolescent	−.36***

*$p < .05$, ***$p < .001$.

3.1.4 | Reciprocity of mattering at the individual and/or dyadic level (RQ 4)

At the individual level, reciprocity was estimated by the correlation between the perceiver and partner effects for each family member (generalized reciprocity). Given the nonsignificant partner effect for the biological parent, only the generalized reciprocity for stepparent and adolescent were estimated. Both were significant, indicating that stepparents ($r = .74$, $p < .05$) and adolescents ($r = .34$, $p < .05$) who felt they mattered to their other family members also elicited higher levels of mattering from their family members. At the dyadic level, we estimated the dyadic reciprocity by correlating the relationship effects for the two family members within the same dyad. Although we were expecting dyadic reciprocity for perceived mattering, none of these correlations were significantly different from zero.

4 | DISCUSSION

Framed within family systems theory, the current study contributed to the field of stepfamily research by applying the social relations model to dyadic measurements of stepfamily members' reports of perceived mattering, which made it possible to disentangle processes of perceived mattering in the stepfamily triad at the individual and relational level. Our research design went beyond stepfamily research's traditional focus on stepfamily dyads and the perspective of only one family member, and thereby provided three additional insights.

First, our findings indicated that in mother-stepfather as well as in father-stepmother families, stepfamily members' perceptions of mattering to one another varied as a function of both individual and relational factors. Furthermore, different trends emerged regarding the RI of individual and relational factors dependent on the particular stepfamily dyad in focus. The way biological parents and adolescents in stepfamilies felt they mattered to one another seemed to vary primarily as a function of individual characteristics of biological parents and, especially, adolescents. In contrast, relationship effects were significant when it came to reports of mattering in which the stepparent was one of the relationship partners. Thus, stepparents' and adolescents' perceptions of mattering to each other not only varied as a function of their individual characteristics but also as a function of the unique dyadic adjustment between stepparent and adolescent. Similarly, the way parents and stepparents felt they mattered to each other was not only explained by their individual characteristics but also by their unique interpersonal adaptation.

The conclusion that relationship variance was negligible to explain mattering perceived in the biological parent–adolescent relationship but significant to understand mattering perceived in the couple and stepparent–adolescent relationship is meaningful because it may reflect fundamental differences in relationship dynamics between biological parent–child relationships and step-relationships. As the average time since stepfamily formation in our sample was less than 4 years, step-relationships were relatively recent compared to the biological parent–adolescent relationship, the latter being a hierarchical and predetermined bond inherently characterized by a shared past and future (Kuczynksi & De Mol, 2015). That is, biological parent–child relationships are not chosen, they are a given and thus often require less investment to maintain, whereas step-relationships are more shaped by choice. Couples choose each other and stepparents and children also, at least to some extent, choose to invest in the development and maintenance of their relationships, by, for instance, engaging in shared activities and everyday talk

(Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010; Pylyser et al., 2018; Schrodt et al., 2008). Thus, stepfamily members' choice to invest in repeated interactions and activities with family members may play a role in the found importance of the unique interpersonal adaptation between stepparents and their other family members.

Furthermore, previous stepfamily researchers and clinicians have emphasized the lack of socially-ascribed guidelines and norms regarding the stepparent role and step-relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Papernow, 2018). As individuals tend to compare the received attention from significant others with societal norms to deduce feelings of mattering (Marshall, 2001), the lack of those norms regarding the stepparent role may also leave stepfamily members with more freedom to mutually define and construct their relationships, resulting in more between-family variance in stepfamily members' sense of mattering to the stepparent and vice versa.

The second implication of our findings relates to the position of the biological parent in the stepfamily triad. Biological parents, on average, perceived they mattered most to their family members and were also the ones who elicited the highest sense of mattering from these family members. These results confirm the connecting role of biological mothers in stepfamilies (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Weaver & Coleman, 2010) and indicate that not only mothers but also fathers take on this connecting role. However, at the same time, the significant difference between mothers' and fathers' perceiver variance showed that, across stepfamilies, only fathers varied in the extent in which they felt they mattered to their family members whereas mothers across stepfamilies experienced mattering in a more similar way. This may imply that although both mothers and fathers take on a connecting role in the stepfamily, fathers differ more in the perception of this role than mothers. This may be a reflection of the fact that socially constructed guidelines on motherhood are more outlined than those on fatherhood and thus may yield a stronger influence on women's experiences in stepfamilies than on those of men (Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Furthermore, biological parents' nonsignificant partner variance combined with the high mean of their partner effect indicates that, overall, there was little between-family variance in the high sense of mattering stepfamily members perceived in their relationship to the biological parent. Thus, across stepfamilies, there seemed to be a high consensus on the connecting role biological parents play in the affective family climate.

Finally, our findings' third implication concerns the reciprocity of perceived mattering in stepfamily triads. At the individual level, stepparents and adolescents who reported a higher sense of mattering to their family members also elicited higher reports of mattering from their family members. This finding may illustrate the presence of a positive feedback loop between mattering and relational investment (Mak & Marshall, 2004): the sense of belonging may stimulate stepfamily members to invest in their family relationships, which in turn elicits a sense of belonging from their family members. At the interpersonal level, no significant dyadic reciprocities were found, indicating that the unique adjustments individuals make to one another in a specific stepfamily relationship were not reciprocated. Given the affective nature of mattering and previous stepfamily research demonstrating that feelings of closeness and affectivity can be understood as a reciprocal process (Pylyser et al., 2018), the absence of these dyadic reciprocities of perceived mattering in stepfamily triads was unexpected and warrants further investigation. However, a possible explanation may be that the inability to separate relationship variance from residual variance caused diluted correlations.

Although these implications provide additional insight into dynamics of stepfamily relationships, some limitations need to be addressed. First, recruiting stepfamily triads in which three family members were willing to participate was challenging, and therefore, our sample size

allowed us to detect only medium-sized effects (Kenny et al., 2006). In order to facilitate the recruitment of stepfamily triads, online questionnaires were used as this method improved the feasibility of participation for all family members. However, this method did not allow for ensuring independent participation of family members. Also, the choice to let stepfamily members decide who would participate when more than one adolescent in the stepfamily met the inclusion criteria has probably contributed to selection bias. Indeed, our sample mainly consisted of well-functioning stepfamilies (e.g., high reports of perceived mattering). Future research that applies a probability sampling method to obtain a more representative sample of stepfamilies could prove useful. Accordingly, it would be worthwhile to explore whether the RI of individual and relational factors to the variance in perceived mattering differs across other family types. For instance, is this different in adopted families, single-parent families, or nuclear families? Is the relative contribution of SRM effects to the total variance in perceived mattering different in distressed stepfamily relationships?

Second, given the high number of joint physical custody arrangements in our sample and previous stepfamily research suggesting that the relationship quality between the other parent and the adolescent influences the development of the stepparent–adolescent relationship (Papernow, 2018; Thorsen & King, 2015), not being able to take into account the perspective of this other biological parent is a serious limitation of the current study. This challenge reflects the complexity of studying stepfamilies, as family membership in stepfamilies typically goes beyond the borders of the household (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Although this study already moves beyond dyads to include triads, future research would benefit from studies that go a step further by also encompassing the perspective of the other parent and thereby recognizing how even stepfamily triads are included in larger webs of interdependency.

Notwithstanding the limitations noted above, the current findings yield meaningful applications for professionals who work with stepfamilies. As perceived mattering can be considered a protective factor for stepfamily members' well-being (Schenck et al., 2009), therapists may want to identify whether interventions to improve stepfamily members' sense of belonging should focus on the individual stepfamily members, on specific stepfamily relationships, or on both. Our findings suggest that the preferred level of intervention may be dependent on the particular stepfamily relationship in focus. For instance, if an adolescent experiences a low sense of mattering to his or her stepparent, it may be valuable that interventions not only focus on the character of the adolescent but also on the specific dynamics within the adolescent–stepparent relationship.

In conclusion, our findings indicate that the relative contribution of intrapersonal and interpersonal factors to stepfamily members' experiences of mattering differs between biological parent–child relationships and the relatively recent relationships stepparents have with their partners or stepchildren. The importance of the interpersonal adaptation between stepparent and other family members illustrates the ambiguous position of the stepparent role whereas the biological parent's connecting role seems to be more clearly conceptualized across stepfamilies.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

As part of IARR's encouragement of open research practices, the authors have provided the following information: This research was not preregistered. The data and materials used in the research are available and can be obtained via email at charlotte.pylyser@ugent.be.

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