



Like a Parent and a Friend, but Not the Father: A Qualitative Study of Stepfathers' Experiences in the Stepfamily

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Research about the experience and position of stepfathers in stepfamilies is scarce. Using data from semi-structured interviews with eight stepfathers, we aim to explore how stepfathers experience family life and their relationships with their (step)children and extended family members (biological father and grandparents), as well as how they describe their position within the stepfamily. Interpretative phenomenological analysis revealed three main themes: most participants saw themselves 'like a parent and a friend.' While none of them considered themselves as 'the father' – this position being assigned to the biological father – they described acting like a parent or a father figure in their relationships with the children. Secondly, despite some difficulties in the initial stages of formation of their new families, most participants described a positive evolution over time and were satisfied with their current family situation. Thirdly, the stepfather's positioning towards non-cohabiting family members such as the biological father and grandparents added complexity but was managed well. Research findings are discussed in light of the current family therapy literature on working with stepfamilies.

Keywords: divorce, family therapy, parent–child relations, qualitative research, stepfamilies, stepfathers

Key Points

- 1 Stepfathers in this study seem to identify with a parental role, while not claiming the father position.
- 2 It seems to be challenging for stepfathers to position themselves in relation to the biological father and to the stepchildren, and to manage these two positions at the same time.
- 3 The complexity of the co-development of several relationships (the partner relationship, the stepfather–stepchild relationship, and the mother–child relationship) should be put centrally in therapeutic conversations with stepfamilies.
- 4 Stepfathers' balancing of their diffuse legal positions with their daily experiences of parenting should be explored within therapeutic conversations with stepfamilies.
- 5 The added complexity of maintaining good bonds with three types of grandparents should be kept in mind when considering the broader social contexts of stepfamilies.

Worldwide, the number of divorces has grown in the last 20 years (Eurostat – Marriage and Divorce Statistics, 2014; National Marriage and Divorce Rate Trends, 2013). In many cases divorce or break-up¹ is followed by the construction of new families that include children from previous relationships – also named 'stepfamilies,' 'blended families,' or 'remarried families.' While the number of stepfamilies has been rising, there is a lack of research focusing on how stepfamilies function, what their unique challenges might be, and how they are experienced by their members.

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In this paper we report on a qualitative study exploring stepfathers' meaning-making of their position in the stepfamily and how they experience their role as a stepfather. In contrast to other recent contributions in the context of high-conflict divorces (e.g., van Lawick & Visser, 2015) and stepfamilies (e.g., Wood, 2015), this paper does not start from a therapeutic issue or question but rather approaches the experience of stepfamily members from a non-clinical perspective. Taking this specific perspective, the experiences discussed below can bring new insights to contemporary family practice.

Stepfamilies

Most often, the point of reference for looking at stepfamilies is the traditional heterosexual nuclear family (Planitz & Feeney, 2009). This nuclear family is considered as the standard against which any other family form is evaluated (Jones, 2003). Different societal perspectives on stepfamilies (including shared norms, stereotypes, expectations, and myths) can be distinguished (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). One perspective is that stepfamilies are incomplete institutions with a fragile future (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Cherlin, 1978). According to Coleman and colleagues, there is an absence of (1) norms that prescribe which role different family members need to fulfill and what should happen if problems arise, and (2) social support (Cherlin, 1978; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). A second perspective characterises the stepfamily and its members in a negative way. This negative perception finds its origins in folklore and in fairy tales such as Snow White, in which the stepparent is depicted as an evil person (Jones, 2003; Wood, 2015). A recent Australian study investigating stepfamily stereotypes reconfirmed the negative perspectives surrounding stepfamilies (Planitz & Feeney, 2009).

Conversely, some contemporary television series illustrate the stepfamily as one big happy unit where instant love prevails (Jones, 2003). A fourth societal perspective pictures stepfamilies as deviant family forms that are less functional and more problematic than the nuclear family (Ganong & Coleman, 1997). In addition to the cultural values and social standards that may be adhered to by families, there are various societal perspectives on stepfamilies that may influence the way the members of the stepfamily behave and interact (Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

The stepfather in the stepfamily

When entering the new family, stepfathers are confronted with a new set of complex family relationships. Unlike in the nuclear family, the stepfamily lacks the shared family history that would usually facilitate problem-solving and help maintain relationships through conflicts and challenges (Papernow, 2006). This absence of context may result in uncertainty concerning what roles are appropriate and how they should be enacted (Caughlin et al., 2000). When it comes to roles and responsibilities, stepfathers may be less certain about their behaviour and role in the stepfamily than other family members (Marsiglio, 2004a). Coleman, Ganong, and Weaver (2001) identified four possible stepparent roles. A stepparent can take the role of a parent, a friend, a combination of the two, or may be distant and demonstrate little affection to the stepchild. Marsiglio and Hinojosa (2007) referred to stepfathers as 'men who are actively involved in helping raise their romantic partner's child' (p. 846).

Research on the experiences of stepfamily members

Over recent decades, the body of research about stepfamily processes and relationships has grown (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). An increasing interest for stepfamily members' experiences can be perceived (e.g., Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright, & Seymour, 2010; White & Gilbreth, 2001). A number of studies have concentrated on the child's perspective. One qualitative study completed by Maes (2012) explored 33 adolescents' perceived mattering to their biological parents and stepparents. The findings revealed that adolescents' relationships to both parents and stepparents mattered in terms of receiving attention, being cared for, and sharing activities. Kinniburgh-White et al. (2010) examined the stepfather–stepchild relationship development of 25 young adults who had grown up in stepfamilies. The results pointed to variations in the quality of the relationship as well as an evolution of the relationship over time. Stepfather–stepchild relationships were most likely to be perceived as positive when characterised by stepfather warmth and support, and stepchild acceptance. Attempts by the stepfathers to exert overt control and influence led to difficulties between stepfather and stepchild.

A few studies have focused on the experiences of stepfathers. One study by Marsiglio (2004b) explored the experiences of 36 stepfathers in relation to their partner and stepchildren using in-depth interviews. The study focused on paternal 'claiming,' which was defined as 'nurturing, providing for, protect and see a stepchild as though the child were his own' (p. 23). It was found that most participants expressed a strong connection with their stepchild, and felt responsible for them (Marsiglio, 2004b). Stepfathers would not only 'claim' stepchildren when the biological father had little or no contact with them, but also often when the biological father was actively involved with the child's life. In these cases the stepfathers in the study tended to respect the father's place and felt they could supplement the biological father's contributions. One qualitative study by Marsiglio and Hinojosa (2007) using in-depth interviews with 46 stepfathers indicated that some stepfathers managed to develop a productive and sometimes friendly relationship with the biological father. Their main motivation was to create a positive climate for the stepchild.

Aims of the Current Study

Existing research on stepfathers has mostly concentrated on the stepfather–stepchild relationship, often from the point of view of the stepchild. More research is needed to investigate the lived experience of the stepfathers (Cartwright, 2010; Sweeney, 2010). The current study focused on stepfathers' meaning-making and experiences with regard to their position in the stepfamily. The study aimed to explore how stepfathers experience their family life and relationships with their (step)children and extended family members (biological father and grandparents), as well as how they describe their position within the stepfamily. In-depth semi-structured interviews were used in order to address the research questions. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) was selected as a means of data analysis as it is useful for detailed research into the personal experiences of people and how they give meaning to their personal and social world (Smith et al., 2009).

Investigating family relationships requires a bidirectional perspective. The bidirectional approach acknowledges that children and parents influence each other reciprocally (Cook, 2001; Harach & Kuczynski, 2005). Both parents and children have

agency, that is, ‘the human capacity for initiating purposeful behavior to influence the other, and the ability to interpret and construct meanings out of relational experiences’ (De Mol & Buysse, 2008, p. 164). Furthermore, when analysing the stepfather’s experiences, a holistic approach needs to be used as these experiences are not only influenced by the complex bidirectional relationship between the stepchild and stepfather, but also by the wider social and cultural context (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015).

Method

Participants

The participants were Belgian stepfathers in heterosexual stepfamilies with one or more stepchildren aged between six and 10. Consistent with the requirement of IPA, that samples are small enough to facilitate an idiographic analysis (Smith et al., 2009), 11 participants were recruited through different channels. One participant responded to our announcement in a newspaper. Eight participants were recruited through e-mails that were sent to the researchers’ personal and professional networks, asking the addressees to forward the e-mail to any potential participants. Finally, two participants responded to a school circular. Three stepfathers who had children that did not meet the age criteria were excluded, leaving a homogenous sample of eight fully compliant participants. Table 1 gives an overview of the participants. All participants were White.

None of the participants was remarried. One stepfather (Tom) was interviewed retrospectively. He had been the stepfather of Stephany, now 21, for 10 years (from when she was four until she was 14). The other stepfathers were still living in the

TABLE 1				
Information about the Participants’ Family Composition				
Name (Age)	Children from Previous Relationship/ Marriage	Children with Mother of the Stepchild	Stepchildren	Number of Years Cohabiting with Mother
Tom (44)	None	None	Stephany, 4–14 years old	8 years
John (38)	None	Chris, 4 years old	Anthony, 8 years old Kate, 9 years old	7 years
Tim (40)	None	None	Mily, 9 years old	4,5 years
Marc (31)	None	Brandon, few weeks old	Brad, 8 years old	5 years
Pete (43)	Sophie, 14 years old Liam, 8 years old Noel, 6 years old	None	Eva, 8 years old	2,5 years
Ryan (29)	None	Oliver, few weeks old	George, 4 years old Julia, 7 years old	1,5 years
Adam (28)	None	None	Jim, 6 years old	2 years
Dan (48)	Arthur, 15 years old	None	Maria, 9 years old	19 months

stepfamily. All of the stepfamilies were constructed after the biological parents separated (none after the death of the biological parent).

In Belgium, when parents divorce, parental authority over the child is generally exercised jointly by both parents. In addition, since 2006, when parents do not come to an agreement concerning the custody of the child ('living' with the child), the court may consider – if this is in the interest of the child – a 50/50 or 'joint' custody where the child spends an equal amount of time with each parent (Van Rumst, n.d.). Stepfathers in Belgium (legally cohabiting or married) have financial duties with respect to the family, including the stepchildren. However, as the stepfather is not the stepchild's biological father, he has neither parental authority nor legal position (Jacobs, 2010). From a juridical point of view, the stepfather has no connection to the stepchild at any level. In 2010, a law proposal making the stepchild a legal inheritor of the stepparents was presented to the senate. So far, the proposal has not been adopted.

Procedure

The study was approved by the ethical committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Ghent University. The eight stepfathers were interviewed at the university (four) or in their homes (four). The first five interviews were conducted by the second author, who is an experienced qualitative researcher and who is skilled in conducting interviews with people about their family relationships. The other three interviews were conducted by the first author, under supervision of the second author. The interviews were semi-structured, using an interview guide including the following topics: position in the stepfamily, bond with the stepchild, broader family context, and perspectives on stepfamily functioning. The questions in the interview guide served as a guideline, with additional questions asked, depending on the responses of the stepfathers. The interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes. The audio-files of the interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author. To protect confidentiality, all names in the interviews were modified.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis

Qualitative data analysis was performed using the IPA steps as described by Smith et al. (2009). A detailed case-by-case analysis was conducted before turning to a comparison across cases. The first step consisted of rereading the transcript of the first interview. Secondly, descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual annotations were made. Thirdly, the first author identified codes or themes by looking for patterns and connections across the data. The fourth step consisted of grouping these themes into sub-themes and higher order themes based on similarities and differences. When the four steps were completed for the first interview, the process was repeated for the other interviews. Subsequently, a group clustering of themes common to most participants was made. Finally, narratives were written to support every theme from this clustering. In these narratives, the exceptions or the themes that had a different meaning for one of the participants were discussed as well. The narratives reflected – as far as possible – the individual expression of the themes by each stepfather and were integrated in the findings section. Stepfathers' quotes were used to clarify the themes and to support the interpretations (Smith et al., 2009).

The validity of the study was promoted by thorough supervision of the analysis process. The different steps were evaluated by the second author and the analysis was repeatedly reviewed by the first author. Furthermore, the first author was reflective about her

own position, having been raised in a stepfamily herself. Regular discussions with the second author shed light on possible influences of this contextual factor.

Findings

Three main themes were identified. The first theme describes how stepfathers see their position in the stepfamily and in particular how they describe their relationship with the stepchild. Theme 2 addresses the evolution of the stepfathers' experiences over time, since most of the participants had been part of a stepfamily for a number of years. The last theme explores the attitude of the stepfather towards the members of their extended stepfamily, namely the grandparents and the biological father.

Theme 1: Like a parent and a friend, but not 'the father'

Five participants described themselves as a 'friend' or even 'the best friend' of the stepchild. The use of the term 'friend' illustrates the intention of the stepfather to access a close but informal relationship with the stepchild:

I try to be her (the stepchild's) best friend. In all respects, that is why I try to name myself the best friend or just friend, or pseudo father, whatever.

(Tim)

While our participants assigned the position of father figure to the biological father, they often described themselves 'as a parent' in relation to the child. This means that they described their behaviour as similar to the behaviour of a parent, with its associated tasks and roles. They said that they wanted to be a father figure for the stepchild, while they were very cautious not to interfere with the positions of the biological parents:

I want to teach them. I want to be there for them. I want to listen to them, pass something on. But I would be lying to myself, if I were to claim that role of father. Because we share custody, during our week I want to be a father as much as possible for them. But I can never be their dad. I don't want them to say that either.

(John)

With 'we share custody', John referred to joint parental authority. The term 'dad' seems to refer to a particular position, while 'being a father' indicates taking on a particular role in the family and towards the stepchild.

When they talked about their position in the stepfamily, the participants often mentioned their participation in the education of the stepchild. In doing so, they frequently referred to the biological parents' efforts as a point of reference. While most participants considered their role in educating the stepchild as having equal value to the biological parents' contribution, several of them described their influence as 'inferior' to the biological parents' involvement. This could be understood as taking on less authority (in terms of steering of the child's behaviour and educational decisions) than the biological parents. It seems that their role is limited to supporting the mother by taking over some tasks (e.g., bringing the stepchild to school), or helping the child with reading and writing. One participant who claimed to have a very limited participation in the education of his stepchild, also reported a poor relationship with the child, and a feeling of not being able to develop the same level of bond compared to the biological parents.

Often, high participation in education was accompanied with a feeling of responsibility for the stepchild:

Obviously you do feel more responsible in your inner life, in your actions as well.
(Tim)

Stepfathers who participated in their stepchild's education to a lesser degree expressed a more limited feeling of responsibility towards them. This was sometimes seen as an advantage:

Thanks to my position, I can and may do things with him that the biological parents cannot. When you are a parent, you always need to be responsible.
(Adam)

The structural dimension of parenthood was emphasised by some participants, who indicated that some situations facilitated their role as a stepfather-parent:

When we are all together, it's always my girlfriend who acts as a parent, who will punish or remedy them. But when I am alone with the children, it's a different situation. Then I will take up the parent role more.
(Dan)

In the biological mothers' absence, the stepfathers took over certain parental tasks.

Subtheme: The difference between biological child and stepchild. Most participants with biological children indicated a clear difference in the bond with their biological children and with their stepchildren, although they found this distinction difficult to describe. They talked about an 'intuitive' difference:

But I feel there is a difference between my children and my stepdaughter.
(Pete)

Some mentioned that the blood tie made the relationship with the biological child stronger, without being able to explain why. Some participants also talked about the importance of the history they shared with their biological children, as their relationships had developed over years since their birth. They felt that, as a stepfather, they had missed out on some of the precious years in the early life of their stepchild. Contrary to the other participants, Marc did not experience any differences between biological parenthood and step-parenthood. However, it should be noted that the stepchild was very young when Marc entered the family.

Theme 2: Experience of family life, both in the past and today

Most participants mentioned an evolution of their experience of life in their family that was positive overall. However, the complexity of this evolution depended on multiple interlinked factors: the relationship with their partner, the stepfather-stepchild relationship, and the mother-child relationship. All three are bidirectional relationships that influence each other.

The stepfathers all recounted that they needed a transition period to adapt to the newly created family. Most participants faced some difficulties at the beginning of the formation of the new family. More specifically, the presence of a strong bond between the mother and the child sometimes created a feeling of exclusion in the stepfather, which was experienced as problematic:

At that time my partner felt very responsible, and mother and daughter were very close. It was very difficult for me to find a place in this relationship.
(Tom)

This illustrates how the bidirectional relationship between stepfather and stepchild was influenced by established relationships. As time passed, the balance of bonds changed, usually resulting in a positive evolution in the stepfather's family life. They described a change in the degree of closeness between the family members with more warmth and closer contact:

In the beginning she was much more reserved. She never would have embraced me, she never would have sat on my lap, she was physically very distant. (...) And now it seems like she sits more on my lap than on her mother's. But she needed some time to accept me and to see me as a part of her family and as a part of her mother's life. I think it has evolved very positively.

(Dan)

Most participants had the feeling of having been accepted and appreciated relatively quickly. Some stepfathers were careful to stay in the background at the beginning of the relationship. For certain participants, this caution was associated with previous failed relationships in which not only breaking the relationship with their partner but also losing contact with her child(ren) was experienced as a loss. As a consequence, they expressed being more reluctant to build a relationship with the stepchild out of fear of increasing the level of emotional pain in the event of a separation with the mother.

One participant mentioned a negative evolution of his family life:

In the beginning I was more ... I was closer to Jim, much closer. I don't know why. I think just because it was the beginning of a new situation and everything was intense, much more intense than after three years.

(Adam)

After a while, Adam felt disappointed in the attitude of his new partner and his stepchild and he became fairly negative about his experience and his family situation.

For the stepfathers, the creation of a new family implied building up two new relationships: one with their new partner and one with her child(ren). Although these two relationships were clearly different in nature, their construction was, for some participants, part of a common process. Considering them as two separate things would create an inner conflict:

My feelings for both of them are interlaced.

(Tom)

It was one 'package'. Not getting to know Wendy (the mother) first and Jesse (the stepchild) afterwards, it was Wendy and Jesse together.

(Adam)

Three other participating stepfathers only started to build up a bond with the stepchild when they physically joined the family home. From then on, they experienced the further development of the two relationships as a common process. The notion of a 'direct match' with the stepchild was often mentioned by stepfathers as an important facilitating factor for the development of both relationships. One stepfather considered that failing to build up a relationship with the stepchild would simply endanger the romantic relationship:

I didn't want there to be no match between the kids and me. It would have damaged the relationship.

(John)

Finally, several stepfathers underlined the importance of a 'shared history' with the stepchild. Most of the participating stepfathers entered the family several years after the stepchild's birth and mentioned their feelings of having missed important early years. A stepfather with two stepchildren mentioned that it was easier to develop a relationship with the youngest stepchild (who was at that time two and a half years old).

Theme 3: Adding complexity: the stepfather's positioning towards non-cohabiting family members

Subtheme 1: Respecting the biological father. As stated above, most participating stepfathers wanted to be a father figure for their stepchild but did not want to usurp the position of the biological father. They emphasised that the stepchild has only one father:

She (the stepchild) really sees her father as her dad, her real dad; according to me that's the best.

(Dan)

Some stepfathers stated that they had good contact with the biological father:

For practical reasons we sometimes need to call each other, speak to each other, or see each other. And that goes well. It is actually running smoothly, given the circumstances.

(Tim)

Some biological fathers were invited by the stepfathers to festivities related to the stepchildren, as they realised that the biological father was very important to the stepchildren.

Two stepfathers reported a rather poor relationship with the biological father of their stepchildren:

Actually, I don't really have contact with him. I see him once in a while but we just greet each other.

(Pete)

For the other stepfather, it was hard to tolerate the permanent communication between his new partner and the biological father of her children.

Subtheme 2: Respect from the grandparents. Stepfamilies deal with an increased level of complexity when it comes to the relationship with the extended family members such as the parents of the mother, her ex-partner's parents (the biological grandparents of the stepchild), and the parents of the stepfather.

There seemed to be a mutual acceptance between the stepfathers and the parents of the mother:

It is their grandchild and actually they could believe that this is none of my business. Fortunately it is not the case, these people really love me. But yeah, it has been an acceptance process for them.

(Tim)

The relationship with the parents of the biological father tended to be more complex, with dynamics ranging from positive to rather poor:

We (John and his partner) see them (the parents of the biological father) as family members, and they think the same. This relationship is important and we want to maintain it.

(John)

Steve's parents (the biological grandparents) consider me as their biggest enemy. They don't want to see me or hear from me.

(Tim)

With regard to the parents of the stepfather, some participants reported that their own parents accepted the new situation without a problem and took care of the stepchild like they took care of their own grandchildren:

I needed to start early for work so my parents came every morning round 7 a.m. to pick him (the stepchild) up so that we could leave for work. They were there almost every morning.

(Marc)

In some cases, the biological children of the stepfather were accepted by the biological grandparents of the stepchildren:

We have a match with the grandparents, they come to our family parties. The grandparents consider my children as additional grandchildren.

(Pete)

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to formulate answers to the following research questions: How do stepfathers experience family life and the relationships with their (step) children and extended family members (biological father and grandparents), and how do they describe their position within the stepfamily? In the discussion section we relate our findings both to the broader literature on stepfamilies and to contemporary family therapy literature.

Position of stepfathers

The expression 'like a friend' or 'best friend' was used by several stepfathers to describe the good relationship they had developed with the stepchild. None of the stepfathers wanted to become 'the father.' They clearly expressed that this position was reserved for the biological father. These findings are in line with previous research. For instance, Marsiglio and Hinojosa (2007) also found that the stepfathers in their sample respected the biological father and did not want to take his position, although they strove to be a 'parent' or 'father figure' for the stepchild (see also Marsiglio, 2004b), and they described themselves as a 'friend' (see also Coleman et al., 2001). Most stepfathers in the current study expressed a wish to be a father figure and performed the tasks and roles of a father as much as possible, without actually being 'the father.' Remarkably, a grounded theory analysis of interviews with *nonresidential* stepmothers by Weaver and Coleman (2005) led to the same conclusion: these stepmothers described their roles as 'mothering but not playing the mother role.' At the same time, the description, 'Like a parent and a friend' refers to the lack of a legal context, which would otherwise provide a clear definition of roles and responsibilities, as well as the absence of a social or cultural model for the stepfather position.

Stepfathers' experiences

In general, the participants reported a positive evolution in their family life over time, with warmer and closer contacts with the stepchild. This is consistent with previous studies investigating young adults, that have shown: (1) variations in the quality of the relationship between the stepfather and the stepchild (Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010) and (2) changes in the relationship quality between the stepfather and the stepchild over time (Maes, 2012; Coleman et al., 2000). For some participants, building up a relationship with the mother and the stepchild happened simultaneously; for others it happened sequentially. All experienced the mutual influences of the multiple bidirectional relationships between their partner, the stepchild, and themselves.

Similar to recent research endeavours on the experience of first-time fatherhood (Ives, 2014), stepfathers seemed to be involved in a constant balancing and adjustment in relation to both their partner and the stepchild. Most stepfathers felt accepted and appreciated by the stepchild, received love from the stepchild, and were happy with their current family situation. The importance of a shared history was frequently mentioned in the context of the relationship development. Several participants talked about missing out on their stepchild's important early years.

In terms of the relationship with non-cohabiting family members, most participants indicated that they had a relatively good relationship with the biological father. They stressed the importance of this relationship and placed it in the best interest of the stepchild. This is in line with the findings of Marsiglio and Hinojosa (2007) who described the relationship between stepfather and biological father as an 'alliance' with the stepfather supporting and facilitating the relationship with the biological father's child. Relationships with the maternal and paternal grandparents and between the stepchildren and the interviewee's own parents were spontaneously touched upon by the participants in the first interviews. As a consequence, this topic was systematically questioned in the remaining interviews.

To our knowledge, the current study is the first investigation of stepfathers' experiences of these relationships with findings pointing at primarily positive evaluations of these complex relationships. Participants who also had a biological child experienced a difference between the bond with the biological child and the bond with the stepchild, except for one stepfather. Remarkably, they had difficulties expressing the nature and the origin of this difference. Some talked about the influence of a blood bond, while others spoke about the impact of a shared history.

Limitations of the study

The finding that the stepfathers in this study – despite pointing at some tensions – described their family relationships as mostly warm and reciprocal, might have been a consequence of the participant recruitment process. Indeed, one may argue that stepfathers with positive experiences may be more willing to participate in this study. Furthermore, not all demographic data were used in the analysis. Data such as the sex of the stepchild, or the number of years the stepfather was present in the stepfamily only served to describe the family situation. Given our qualitative research design, these variables could not be used to make comparisons between different situations. Future research should further investigate the influence of these factors as well as the importance of the stepfathers' presence in the early years of the stepchildren's lives for the development of their relationship.

Implications for Family Therapy Practice

Recently, Wood (2015) presented a 'systemically informed toolkit' for working with stepfamilies, integrating ideas from stepfamily literature and systemic frameworks such as narrative therapy, solution-focused therapy, and emotion-focused family therapy. Along the line of integrating research findings and clinical interventions, our study has important implications for the field of marital and family therapy. First of all, it highlights the importance of a thorough inquiry of stepfathers' experiences, whenever they are part of a unit that seeks family therapy. Based on our in-depth study, which revealed a number of differences between the participating stepfathers, great variability in these experiences can be expected. Secondly, the complexity of the co-development of several relationships (the partner relationship, the stepfather–stepchild relationship, and the mother–child relationship) should be placed centrally in conversations with stepfamilies. This means that the construction of stepfather–stepchild relationships should not be taken for granted and that sufficient attention should be given to new partners' struggles with this co-development.

Thirdly, in multi-fragmented stepfamilies (Pasteels & Mortelmans, 2013), stepfathers' attempts to protect themselves seemed to put an extra burden on the construction of a relationship with the new stepchildren in some cases. Fourthly, the added complexity of maintaining good bonds with three types of grandparents was illustrated in the study and should be kept in mind when considering the broader social contexts of stepfamilies. And finally, it seems challenging for stepfathers to position themselves in interactions with the biological father of their stepchildren. While for Gold (2010), helping stepfathers to 'step away' from the father role was presented as a goal of family therapy, our findings suggest that stepfathers do have this tendency to differentiate their role from the role of the biological father. They were careful not to take over the role of 'the father' while at the same being aware of the societal pressure on stepfamilies and feeling the urge to participate in the creation of a perfectly functioning reconstituted family (Wood, 2015).

The lack of a legal framework (Planitz & Feeney, 2009) can be a relevant issue in therapeutic conversations with stepfamilies. Remarkably, the construction of a warm, affective relationship with the stepchild is often expected within this legal vacuum.

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Note

¹ In this paper 'divorce' will be used for both ending a marriage and for the termination of a legal cohabitation.

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