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IS VARIATION IN BIOLOGICAL AND RESIDENTIAL TIES TO CHILDREN LINKED TO MOTHERS' PARENTAL STRESS AND PERCEPTIONS OF CO-PARENTING?

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Abstract

Mothers with children from prior relationships or with stepchildren may perceive greater challenges in parenting than their counterparts in less complex families. We use the Families and Relationships Study (FRS) to analyze parental stress and perceptions of co-parenting among cohabiting and married mothers with resident minor children (N = 679). Compared to mothers with only shared children, parental stress and perceptions of co-parenting generally do not differ when mothers have children from prior unions. However, mothers with resident stepchildren evaluate the distribution of childcare as less fair, consider their partners as less reliable co-parents, and rate their partner more poorly as a co-parent relative to those with no stepchildren. These findings suggest that creating a stepfamily through one's own children may not present additional parenting challenges or stressors whereas having stepchildren introduced through a partner may be linked to a different, and less positive, parenting experience.

Keywords: family complexity; stepfamily; parental stress; co-parenting

Is Variation in Biological and Residential Ties to Children Linked to Mothers' Parental Stress and Perceptions of Co-Parenting?

The living arrangements and family structures of today's families often diverge from traditional notions of the family. High rates of union instability and repartnering (Cherlin, 2009), along with high levels of nonmarital childbearing (Curtin, Ventura, & Martinez, 2014), mean that in many couples, one or both partners have children from a prior relationship. As such, cohabiting and married parents often have different relationships to the children within their family. The variation in relationships and living arrangements that exist between and among stepparents, stepchildren, and half-siblings, known as "family complexity" (Carlson & Meyer, 2014), has received extensive attention in the demographic literature (e.g., Cancian, Meyer, & Cook, 2011, 2017; Manning, Brown, & Stykes, 2014; Tach, 2015). A growing body of work has also examined how such complexity is linked to child outcomes (e.g., Brown, Manning, & Stykes, 2015; Dorius & Guzzo, 2016; Fomby & Osborne, 2017; Fomby, Goode, & Mollborn, 2016).

What is less clear, however, is whether parental well-being varies not just between intact families vs. more complex stepfamilies but whether there are variations based on which partner brings children from prior relationships into the union. Prior work has shown that parents have poorer psychological health (Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Evenson & Simon, 2005) and lower relationship quality (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009) than couples without children. Parenthood can be difficult under the best of circumstances, but it may be even more challenging when roles and responsibilities are unclear or seem to vary across children or between partners (Fomby, 2018; Pace & Shafer, 2015). For instance, stepmothers are often expected by their partners to serve in a mothering capacity (Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011). Performing mothering duties for both stepchildren and biological children may increase

workload and negatively impact psychological well-being, especially when there is relatively little support for, or recognition of, the efforts of stepmothers (Neilsen, 1999; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). Similarly, the demands of parenting taxes most parents' relationships, but conflict may be particularly likely in a stepfamily, as parents feel torn between partners and children (Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Overall, then, it seems possible that complex family ties would increase parental stress and lead parents to unfavorably evaluate their partner as a co-parent (i.e., perceived fairness of childcare, whether one is a 'good' parent). Parental stress and co-parental relationship quality are, in turn, associated with overall relationship quality (Durtschi, Soloski, & Kimmes, 2017), and higher levels of conflict about childrearing in stepfamilies (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002) likely contributes to the higher levels of divorce among remarriages compared to first marriages (Bumpass & Raley, 2007).

In this paper, we use the Families and Relationship Survey (FRS) to analyze parental stress and perceptions of co-parenting among married and cohabiting mothers with resident minor children and explicitly consider mothers' biological and stepparent ties to children in and outside of the household. Distinguishing between the different types of biological and residential ties among mothers provides a nuanced investigation into the ways that complexity may impact the parenting experience and well-being.

Theoretical Background

Parenting, although emotionally rewarding, can be also be a physically and mentally challenging endeavor (Umberson & Gove, 1989). Not surprisingly, parents often report higher levels of depression than couples without children (Evenson & Simon, 2005), and many parents report feelings of incompetency and being overwhelmed, indicative of parental stress (Anthony et al., 2005; Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009). As a social role, parenthood

entails a set of expectations regarding emotional, physical, and financial care (Alstott, 2004), with the expectations particularly high for mothers (Gunderson & Barrett, 2017). In families with only shared children (that is, all children are biologically related to both partners), it may be fairly straightforward to understand and follow the norms, boundaries, and roles expected of mothers, but the expectations and norms for stepparents are far less certain (Cherlin, 1978; Stewart, 2007). In fact, it is not always clear who is, and is not, in a stepfamily, with members of the same stepfamily unit differing in who they include in their family (Brown & Manning, 2009; Stewart, 2005) and what they expect from each other (Marsiglio, 1992; Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright, & Seymour, 2010; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). The parental role perspective (Scott & Alwin, 1989) suggests that when parents take on multiple roles, such as being both a biological parent and a stepparent, their mental health may suffer as they try to negotiate multiple roles that carry different – and sometimes contradictory – expectations (Pace & Shafer, 2015).

Mothers' Own Children and Maternal Stress and Co-Parenting

Cohabiting and married mothers with children from prior relationships can face challenges that affect their well-being and their relationship with their current partner. In a couple with only shared children, a parent can reasonably expect his or her partner to be involved in parenting, but this is less likely to be the case in stepfamilies. Compared to resident biological fathers, resident stepfathers appear to spend less time with children (Kalil, Ryan, & Chor, 2014), though other work finds more mixed results (Berger, Carlson, Bzostek, & Osborne, 2008; Carlson & Berger, 2013). Not only might mothers experience lower levels of paternal involvement from stepfathers, but they may also receive less parenting help from children's biological fathers living elsewhere, as biological father involvement is lower among mothers in unions with new partners (Guzzo, 2009; Tach, Mincy & Edin, 2010). Thus, mothers in a mother-stepfather family may carry more

of the parental workload than mothers in a two-biological parent family, leading to feelings of being overwhelmed and stressed.

It is less clear whether also having a shared child would make parenting more or less difficult when mothers have a child from a prior union. It is possible that the cohabiting partner or spouse may treat his biological and stepchildren differently, and mothers may feel obligated to compensate for variation in involvement or play a peacekeeper role to maintain ties and minimize conflict. This would lead to higher maternal stress. Conversely, a shared child can serve as a bond between parents, partners, and stepchildren (Ganong & Coleman, 1988), as every person in the family has a least one shared biological tie. Further, a shared child also means both partners are biological parents (though not necessarily to all the children in their family), and the partner's parent role may translate into greater involvement with all children in the household. Hofferth and Anderson (2003), for instance, find that there are no differences in paternal involvement across biological children and stepchildren in families with shared children. And finally, it may be the case that regardless of whether all the children in the household have a biological father present, children's day-to-day needs remain high, so although mothers may be stressed in general, it may not differ by whether their children all have the same father.

The factors that contribute to maternal stress may also affect how mothers feel about their partners as co-parents. Mothers do more child care and housework than fathers (Kotila, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Kamp Dush, 2013; Parker & Wang, 2013), and mothers often report that they expect or wish their child's father would do more than he actually does (Biehle & Mickelson, 2012). These feelings may be exacerbated in mother-stepfather families because stepfathers spend less time with children than fathers in biological families (Kalil, Ryan & Chor, 2014), at least when there are no shared children (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003). Additionally, in

mother-stepfather families, mothers take primary responsibility not only for their children but for establishing the roles stepfathers play (Ganong, Coleman, Jamison, & Feistman, 2015). Mothers often wish that their partners (their child's stepfather) would take on more of a paternal role than either stepfathers or children seem to want (Weaver & Coleman, 2010). The extra burden of not only fulfilling the mother role but also monitoring a partner's adherence to the stepfather role may lead to lower evaluations of the cohabiting partner or spouse as a co-parent.

In sum, since stepfathers generally are less involved than biological fathers are, we posit the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Relative to cohabiting and married mothers with only shared children, mothers with children from a prior union (i.e., stepchildren for the partner) will experience more parental stress and evaluate their partners as co-parents less favorably, especially if they do not have any shared children.

Partners' Children and Maternal Stress and Co-Parenting

Not only might mothers in a mother-stepfather family find parenthood more difficult than those in families with only shared children, but mothers with both biological children and stepchildren also face challenges (Pace & Shafer, 2015). The same ambiguities about parental roles that stepfathers face are also present among stepmothers, yet the overall expectations of motherhood are higher (Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011). Stepmothers find it more difficult to parent stepchildren than biological children (MacDonald & DeMaris, 1996), and mothers with stepchildren report more parental stress than mothers without stepchildren (Nielsen, 1999; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). It could be particularly challenging to have both biological children and stepchildren because there is a mix of clear and ambiguous ties and expectations, which could make it difficult for mothers to balance meeting the needs of both sets of children. And of

course, the conceptual ambiguity is accompanied by more logistical issues – given that biological mothers undertake more of the parenting and household tasks than fathers, having additional children via the presence of stepchildren almost certainly increases the parental load, leading to more parental stress.

Moreover, even though stepmothers do indeed engage in a significant degree of parenting behaviors, their childrearing efforts are often undervalued and unnoticed (Nielsen, 1999). They receive little social support and often report higher levels of depression (Fomby, 2018; Pace & Shafer, 2015), though some work suggests that those with stepchildren do not have poorer mental health (Evenson & Simon, 2005). While many mothers view the share of childrearing they undertake, relative to their partners, to be unbalanced (Cowdery & Knudson-Martin, 2005), stepmothers may view caring for stepchildren to be particularly unfair. However, the degree to which having stepchildren may affect stepmothers likely varies by whether they live in the same household. On the one hand, because children more often have their primary residence with their biological mother after a parental breakup, many biological fathers do not bring full-time residential stepchildren with them into new families. When stepchildren do not live with their stepmother, it can be difficult to establish strong relationships because opportunities for frequent interaction are rare, and the role obligations of part-time stepmothering can be especially ambiguous (Stewart, 2007). On the other hand, if stepchildren do not live in the household, they do not create additional work for stepmothers on a frequent basis and so may have little impact on maternal stress and the co-parenting relationship.

In sum, given that stepmothering is likely to increase the childrearing load of biological mothers, we present the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Relative to cohabiting and married mothers with only shared children, mothers whose partners have children from a prior union (i.e., stepchildren for the respondent) will experience more parental stress and evaluate their partners as co-parents less favorably, especially if stepchildren live in the same household.

Other Factors Associated with Parenting and Well-Being

There are other characteristics linked to women's experiences of mothering, including marital status, maternal socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, and children's ages. Although marriage is a more institutionalized union form (Cherlin, 2004; Nock, 1995) in which parenting ties and expectations might be clearer, some work suggests that cohabiting fathers are more involved with their children than married fathers (Hohmann-Marriott, 2011); however, this may be true only for biological parent families rather than stepfather families (Berger, Carlson, Bzostek, & Osborne, 2008). Additionally, given the short-term nature of cohabitation (Guzzo, 2014) and the poorer relationship quality among cohabiting couples (Skinner, Bahr, Crane, & Call, 2002), married stepfamilies may be selective of those with better relationships and functioning and thus more likely to evaluate their partners more favorably. Less-advantaged women – for instance, those with less education – are more likely to both bring children from prior relationships into their current union and to be partnered with someone who already has children (Guzzo, 2017). Further, socioeconomic and demographic disadvantage is also linked to higher maternal stress (Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009). Stepmother-father households with resident stepchildren tend to have more socioeconomic resources than mother-stepfather households (Kreider & Lofquist, 2014). Children's age also likely affects stress and co-parenting, as young children are especially labor- and time-intensive.

Data and Methods

We use the Families and Relationships Survey (FRS) to study mother's experiences and perceptions of parenting. The FRS is a nationally representative dataset collected by the GfK Group, formerly known as Knowledge Networks, for the National Center for Family and Marriage Research (NCFMR) at Bowling Green State University. It is comprised of 7,242 adults aged 18-64 and was collected in September and October of 2013. The survey was modeled on the 1987-88 National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) but also uses questions from more recent surveys, including the Fragile Families and Child WellBeing Study. Data were collected using the KnowledgePanel®, an online panel sample, and contain oversamples of blacks, Hispanics, and cohabitors.

For the purposes of analyses, we restrict the FRS sample in several ways. We exclude the 293 respondents who reported living with a same-sex spouse or partner, as we could not decisively identify stepfamily status for those with children (N = 6,949). Next, we restrict the sample to individuals with valid responses on dates of birth for both themselves and their children (if any), dropping 156 cases and resulting in a sample of 6,793 respondents. Given our focus on the co-parental relationship, we then restrict the analysis to biological parents (N = 4,029) who were coupled at the time of the interview (N = 3,195), and whose biological children were all minors (N = 1,412) and all lived in the household (N = 1,377). Respondents' stepchildren, however, could live in the household or elsewhere. Resident stepchildren are those listed in the household roster as living in the household full-time during the month prior to the interview, and nonresident stepchildren are identified from a series of questions about the respondent's partner's children who do not live in the household. Finally, we exclude men (N = 672) from the analytic sample for both theoretical reasons (we expect the linkages between

complex ties and parenting to be strongest for mothers given social pressures and norms) and practical reasons, as there were relatively few fathers with children from a past relationship in the household (N = 66, split evenly between those with only children from a past relationship and those with children from both a past relationship and their current relationship) or with a nonresidential stepchild (N = 9). The exclusion of men resulted in an initial analytical sample size of 705 mothers; 22 cases were excluded due to missing data on the dependent variables (discussed below), three cases were excluded due to missing data on the key independent variables, and one case was dropped due to missing data on both the independent and dependent variables, resulting in a final analytical sample of 679 cohabiting and married mothers with resident biological children.

Dependent Variables

Parenting stress is measured with five statements: "Being a parent is harder than I thought it would be," "I feel trapped in my responsibilities as a parent," "I find taking care of my child(ren) is much more work than pleasure," "I often feel tired, worn out, or exhausted from raising a family," and "I often wish I could be free from the responsibilities of being a parent." Responses were initially measured through a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1 = "Strongly Agree" to 5 = "Strongly Disagree"), but all measures were reverse coded such that higher scores indicate more parental stress. A scale was created by averaging responses of parents with at least three valid responses to the five parenting stress indicators ($\alpha = 0.79$). These measures have been used as scales or single items in prior work on parental stress (e.g., Beck, Cooper, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010; Bronte-Tinkew, Moore, Matthews, & Carrano, 2007; Seltzer, 1998).

We have three measures indicating perceptions of co-parenting: reliability of the partner as a co-parent, perceived fairness of childcare, and an overall evaluation of the partner as a

parent. Reliability of the partner as a co-parent is measured through the following six statements: "When your partner is with your child(ren), he/she acts like the father/mother you want for your child," "Your partner can be trusted to take good care of your child(ren)," "Your partner respects the schedules and rules you make for your child(ren)," "Your partner supports you in the way you want to raise the child(ren)," "You and your partner can talk about problems that come up with raising your child(ren)," and "You can count on your partner for help when you need someone to look after your child(ren) for a few hours." Responses were initially measured through a 4-point Likert scale (1 = "Always True" to 4 = "Never True") but were reverse coded so higher scores indicate evaluating the partner as more reliable. A scale was created by averaging responses of parents with at least four valid responses to the six statements ($\alpha = 0.86$). Prior research on co-parenting have used these measures in scales (e.g., Bronte-Tinkew, Moore, Matthews, & Carrano, 2007; Harknett, 2009; Waller, 2012).

Perceived fairness of childcare is a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent feels that their share of the time spent on childcare is fair. Respondents were first asked "How much of the looking after children is usually done by you?" and then asked "Do you think this is fair, or do you think you do more than your share?" with response categories of "fair," "do more than own share," or "other." Our indicator was recoded so any response other than "fair" is put in the reference category of "not fair." Finally, the mother's overall evaluation of her partner as a parent is a categorical measure derived from the question "Think[ing] about the kind of parent that your [partner] is to your child(ren), would you say that your [partner] is…" with valid responses ranging from 1 = "not a good parent" to 4 = "an excellent parent."

Independent Variables

Maternal biological and residential ties are measured using two variables categorizing the mother's own children and the presence and living arrangements of stepchildren (i.e., the partner's children). The variable indicating *mother's own children* is categorized as: children from current relationship only, children from prior relationship only, and children from both a current and prior relationship; recall that the analytical sample is restricted to mothers living with all of their biological minor children. *Stepchildren* is based on a series of questions about whether the spouse or partner has any biological children who are not the respondent's biological children, how many are under age 18 and live in the household, how many are over 18 and live in the household, and how many, regardless of age, live outside of the household. Because we could not differentiate nonresidential stepchildren by age, we count all of the partner's children living in the house as a resident stepchild regardless of age. As such, this variable is operationalized as a categorical variable indicating if the respondent has: no stepchildren, only nonresidential stepchildren, or at least one residential stepchild.

Additional socioeconomic, demographic, and child-related characteristics are also included in the analysis. Marital status is a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent is married or cohabiting. The respondent's age at the time of survey is a continuous measure, as is the age of the respondent's youngest biological child. The respondent's own family structure during adolescence is a dichotomous measure indicating whether the respondent lived with two biological parents at the age of 14. Education is a categorical variable including less than a high school degree, high school degree/GED, some college, and Bachelor's degree or higher. Race is a categorical variable including white, black, Hispanic, and other/multi-racial. Employment status is a categorical variable including full-time, part-time, not employed, and

refused/mixed status. Household income is an interval-level variable, ranging from less than $5,000 to $175,000 or more; we treat this variable as a continuous measure in analyses. The distribution of the variables is shown in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

All data and analyses are weighted. Online data collection efforts often yield concerns over representativeness and generalizability; to address this, we compared the characteristics of our analytical sample to the nationally representative 2011-15 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) which, when weighted, represents the population of men age and women aged 15-44 in 2013 and is a primary source of data for analyzing family behaviors in the U.S. We restricted the NSFG to coupled mothers aged 18 or older and restricted the FRS to coupled mothers 44 or younger, and the comparison is shown in Appendix A. The samples are similar overall, but the FRS appears to be slightly more advantaged than the NSFG – a larger proportion of coupled mothers are married (84% to 77%, respectively), and the median FRS household income is $60-74,999 whereas the median NSFG household income is $50-59,999. The FRS analytical sample contains slightly more white mothers (66%) than the NSFG (60%), though fewer are working full-time (34% vs. 43%, respectively). This comparison suggests that the FRS data are likely to be generalizable to the wider population.

Analytic Plan

We begin by presenting variation in the weighted mean levels or distribution of our four dependent variables across stepfamily types. We then explore whether there are differences in our dependent variables across cohabiting and married stepfamilies. Next, we conduct multivariate analyses in which we regress the four dependent measures on our indicators of mothers' biological and residential ties to children and the control variables. Maternal stress and

perception of the partner's reliability as a co-parent are continuous measures analyzed using OLS regression. The perception of childcare fairness is a dichotomous measure and is analyzed using logistic regression. Finally, the overall evaluation of the partner as a parent is a categorical measure and is analyzed using ordinal logistic regression. In the interest of brevity, our discussion of the multivariate analyses only includes the key independent variables of interest.

Results

Descriptive Results

Table 2 reports the weighted descriptives for the measures of maternal stress and perceptions of co-parenting across the different types of ties mothers have with children in and outside of their household. About 18% of mothers reported having children from a past union, and 20% of the mothers reported having at least one stepchild (overall, 30% of the analytical sample is in a stepfamily through either the mother's prior childbearing, the partner's prior childbearing, or both, not shown). The average parental stress score was 2.52 on a scale of 1 to 5, indicative of modest levels of stress. Mothers with children from only the current relationship reported equal parental stress scores to mothers with only children from a past relationship. Those with children from both the current and past relationship, however, had slightly lower scores. Parental stress also varied according to the presence of a stepchild: mothers with only nonresidential stepchildren reported the lowest levels of parental stress (2.28), followed by those with any resident stepchildren (2.49), and those with no stepchildren (2.55).

[Table 2 about here]

The mothers in the analytic sample evaluated their partners' reliability as co-parents favorably, with an average score of 3.61 on a scale of 1 to 4. Those with only shared children reported the highest score, on average, whereas mothers with only children from a past

relationship reported the lowest (3.64 and 3.41, respectively), and this difference was statistically significant. Significantly higher reliability scores were also reported by mothers who had no stepchildren compared to mothers living in a household with at least one stepchild (3.65 and 3.42, respectively). The majority (69%) of mothers felt their share of the time spent on childcare was fair, and this share varied little across the categories of the mother's own children. However, perceptions of childcare fairness varied significantly by the presence of stepchildren. Nearly three-quarters of mothers with only nonresidential stepchildren agreed that childcare was fair between themselves and their partner whereas just over half of those living with a stepchild felt that childcare was fair.

Overall, 46% of mothers stated that their partner was an "excellent" parent, with less than 3% reporting their partner was not a good parent. Among mothers with simpler family ties in the household – those with only children from their current relationship or with no stepchildren – about half said they felt their partner was an "excellent" parent. This is significantly higher than among those with only children from a prior relationship or those with resident stepchildren. For example, among those with only children from past relationships, less than one-third felt they had a partner who was an excellent parent to their children, and an even smaller share felt this way among those who lived with a stepchild. Mothers most often reported that their partner was not a good parent when the partner had children from a prior relationship who lived in a separate residence.

We also explored whether variation across cohabiting and married families may be linked to differential experiences of stepparenting; overall, 32% of stepfamilies were cohabitations compared to only 13% of families with only shared children (not shown). Specifically, we compared our dependent variables across cohabiting and marital unions within different types of

stepfamilies (Table 3). For stepfamilies overall – when either or both partners had children from a prior union – the bivariate differences between cohabiting and married stepfamilies were minimal. There was no strong and consistent evidence that mothers in marital stepfamilies experienced better co-parenting relationships than their cohabiting peers, suggesting that variation in parenting experiences across ties to children is not likely driven by differential selection into, and experiences of, cohabitation and marriage.

[Table 3 about here]

Multivariate Results

The bivariate results suggested some variation in maternal stress and perceptions of co-parenting across our two variables measuring mother's ties to children. We turn to multivariate models to consider the associations more closely. In all models, we show two sets of results. First, we use the least complex categories of our two measures (only shared children; no stepchildren) as the reference category. Second, we then use the most complex category (children from both the current and a prior relationship; any residential stepchildren). In doing so, we can see first whether any type of stepfamily status is linked to mothers' experiences of parenting and then whether there is any variation in the association based on which partner brings children from a prior relationship into the union. We begin with maternal stress in Model 1 of Table 4. Contrary to both hypotheses, neither mother's own children nor the presence of stepchildren were related to parental stress in the presence of controls for covariates (in unconditional models, not shown, having only nonresidential stepchildren was marginally associated with lower stress relative to mothers with no stepchildren).

[Table 4 about here]

Next, we consider mothers' evaluation of their partner's reliability as a co-parent (Model 2 of Table 4). Mothers who had children from a prior relationship did not differ from mothers with only shared children in terms of evaluating partners' reliability, contrary to Hypothesis 1. However, partners' children from past relationships did seem to matter but only if those children lived in the household, providing partial support for Hypothesis 2. Mothers with at least one residential stepchild had marginally lower evaluations (by 0.17 points) of their partner's reliability as a co-parent than those with no stepchildren; there was no association with having nonresidential stepchildren.

The perception of childcare fairness is analyzed in Model 3 of Table 5. As with stress and perceptions of the partner's reliability, there is no support for Hypothesis 1 regarding the women's own children. Perceptions of childcare fairness did not significantly differ whether the children were from the mother's current, past, or both their current and past relationships. The presence of a stepchild in the household, though, was associated with whether the mother reported childcare as fair, again providing support for Hypothesis 2. Compared to mothers with no stepchildren, mothers with resident stepchildren were half as likely to consider the division of childcare time as fair (Odds Ratio, OR = $e^{-0.74}$= 0.48). Further, compared to mothers with resident stepchildren, mothers with nonresident stepchildren were marginally more likely (OR = $e^{0.96}$ =2.60) to consider childcare distribution as fair.

[Table 5 about here]

Model 4 of Table 5 presents the results predicting the mother's overall evaluation of her partner as a parent, with higher scores meaning a more positive evaluation. This is the only indicator of co-parenting in which there is any support for Hypothesis 1 regarding mothers' own children. Mothers who have only children from a past relationship viewed their partner as a

parent overall about half as favorably as mothers with only shared children (OR = $e^{-0.70}$ = 0.50), though the association was only marginally significant. There is stronger support for Hypothesis 2 about the partners' children – compared to mothers with no stepchildren, mothers with resident stepchildren evaluated their cohabiting partner or spouse significantly less favorably as a parent (OR = $e^{-0.91}$= 0.40). Nonresident stepchildren were not linked to women's overall evaluation of partners as parents.

Discussion

Much of the existing research on stepfamilies and complex families has focused, quite understandably, on the well-being of children (e.g., Brown, Manning, & Stykes 2015; Fomby & Osborne, 2017; Fomby, Goode, & Mollborn, 2016). The literature on parental well-being in families is less well-developed, especially work that considers the different sources of complexity – that is, which partner is a biological parent, which partner is a stepparent, and where children reside. There is a fairly broad body of research on stepmothers (e.g., Craig & Johnson, 2011; Doodson, 2014; Henry & McCue, 2009), usually focused on their role ambiguity and mental health (e.g., Doodson & Davies, 2014; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011), with little attention to co-parenting perceptions. Biological mothers in stepfamilies have received much less attention, as most work on such families examines stepfathers (e.g., King, 2009; MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002; Marsiglio, 2004). To the extent that the ways parents perceive their partners as a co-parent may affect the overall quality of the relationship and its stability (not to mention the environment in which children are being reared), a better understanding of whether and how complex family structures are linked to the parenting experience is warranted. This is especially true for mothers and stepmothers, for whom the roles, expectations, and obligations are high (Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011; Katz-Wise, Priess, & Hyde, 2010).

Using nationally representative data, we examined how mothers' own children and their partner's children (and where these children lived) were associated with mothers' parental stress and their perceptions of partners as co-parents. We hypothesized that relative to partnered mothers with only shared children, both a mother's own children from past relationships (Hypothesis 1) and her partner's children from past relationships (Hypothesis 2) would be positively associated with parental stress and negatively associated with her perceptions of her cohabiting partner or spouse as a co-parent. There was little evidence that mothers' own children were linked to stress and co-parenting perceptions, contrary to Hypothesis 1. Mothers with no shared children with their partner were marginally less likely to consider him a good parent, but there were no other associations. However, mothers' parenting experiences did seem to vary by the presence of stepchildren, providing some support for Hypothesis 2. Compared to those with no stepchildren, mothers with a residential stepchild thought their share of time spent on childcare was less fair, considered their partners as less reliable parents, and evaluated their partner overall less favorably as a co-parent. Additionally, mothers with any residential stepchildren were also more likely to think their distribution of childcare time was more unfair than those with only nonresidential stepchildren.

These results suggest that members of a stepfamily may view the processes within that family quite differently. Stepmothering appears to be negatively linked to a mother's parenting experiences whereas mothering biological children, even when children have different fathers or have a stepfather, is not. Why might maternal perceptions of parenting in a stepfamily be unrelated to the presence of a mother's children from a prior union? One, perhaps mothers have fairly low expectations for stepfathers as parents (Cassoni & Caldana, 2012; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011) and are thus more easily satisfied with their partner's parenting behaviors. If mothers do

not expect their partner to completely take on the father role – for instance, by fully sharing in discipline, helping with homework, or even engaging in playful interactions – then any such behaviors may meet their expectations, and in fact, mothers may be grateful for any level of involvement from stepfathers. As Weaver & Coleman (2010) show, mothers generally see childrearing as their responsibility, not the stepfather's responsibility. Two, mothers may be more directive with stepparent partners compared to biological-parent partners in terms of interactions with children. Maternal gatekeeping can work both ways – mothers can actually 'open' the gate and encourage or facilitate stepparent involvement, though the mother usually retains implicit supervision (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). In this way, mothers could be satisfied with what stepfathers are doing because the stepfathers are quite literally doing exactly what the mother has asked. Third, and perhaps related to the second point, stepfathers may actually be involved fathers. Given evidence that mothers are selective in forming new partnerships (Bzostek, McLanahan, & Carlson, 2012), mothers with children from past relationships may choose new partners who are receptive to an active co-parenting role. Men who become residential stepfathers may be a select group who are more willing and interested in parenting.

A mother's views on co-parenting do seem to vary, though, by whether she is also performing in the stepmother role, at least when stepchildren live in the household. This suggests that mothers might have some degree of resentment towards their partner in carrying out parenting tasks for non-biological children while simultaneously caring for their own biological children. It may be that cohabiting partners and husbands are, in fact, expecting stepmothers to perform a substantial proportion of the childrearing duties and providing little support or acknowledgement. Conversely, the higher pressures mothers face, relative to fathers, may make it more difficult for them to parent their biological children without simultaneously

also parenting their stepchildren, even without being asked by their partners. For instance, mothers may feel wider social pressure to ensure that all their children – biological and step – are eating well, doing their homework, and adhering to a bedtime routine, and the emotional and mental labor that goes into such parenting behaviors may feel especially unappreciated.

Another possible explanation is that there something unique – and more challenging – about having resident stepchildren for women than is true for men. Being a resident stepmother is less common than being a resident stepfather; only 20% of children living in a stepfamily are living in a resident stepmother-father family (Kreider & Lofquist, 2014). Although resident stepmothers tend to live in more advantaged households than resident stepfathers (Hofferth, 2006; Kreider & Lofquist, 2014), there may also be something distinctive about these families in other ways that contributes to less favorable stepparenting experiences given that it is still uncommon for fathers to have primary physical custody (Meyer, Cancian, & Cook, 2017). They may perceive more conflict or interference from nonresidential mothers (Murray, 2011) compared to residential stepfathers, which may impact their perceptions of stepparenting and coparenting. In general, though, residential stepmothers have been an understudied group that merits more attention (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Stewart, 2007).

Finally, poorer perceptions of co-parenting may not be unique to mothers – it may be that stepparents in general feel undervalued and as if they are doing more parenting than they should. The mothers here did not perceive their co-parenting relationship any more or less favorably when their partners were stepparents to their own biological children, but it is quite possible the partners viewed the relationship differently. Put differently, it could be that parents rarely view their own biological children as introducing potential challenges to co-parenting but are less able to perceive their partners' difficulties or concerns in raising non-biological children. As a matter

of perspective, perhaps individuals simply do not – or cannot – view their own children as stressful or problematic for another person because of their own ties to the children. Biological parents expect some degree of stress and a set of obligations to their children, and they may have difficulty recognizing that their partners – those who are not biologically related to their children – do not possess similar expectations and obligations (or feel the same level of reward) and thus fail to recognize that their partners may resent stepparenting to some degree. Unfortunately, the FRS does not have couple-level data, so we could not explore how the respondents' partners would evaluate the parenting experience or compare parents' reports. Nor were we able to conduct a parallel analysis for fathers. Given that fathers are far less likely to have children from past relationships living with them full-time in the household (Lin, Schaeffer, Seltzer, & Turschen, 2004; Waller & Jones, 2014), there were too few cohabiting and married fathers who reported living with all of their biological children and/or fathers partnered with mothers who had nonresidential biological children to conduct analyses. It would have also been preferable to consider only a partner's minor children who lived in the household permanently and for which the partner has primary custody, but we lacked information on the ages of nonresidential stepchildren, and our question on a partner's children living in the respondent's home did not specify full-time or other custody aspects.

It is worth noting that we presented the associations between a mother's own children, her partner's children, and stress and perceptions of co-parenting as independent and additive. It is possible, though, that any associations might be interactive, with mothers who have both children from past relationships *and* stepchildren particularly stressed or concerned about their partner as a co-parent. Due to small sample sizes, though, we were unable to combine the two types of biological and residential ties into a single measure. In general, the small analytical

sample, and particularly small numbers of cases for some family categories (i.e., there were only 76 cases where the mother had children from a prior union and only 49 cases where the mother had nonresident stepchildren), is worth keeping in mind. It is possible that with a larger sample size, statistically significant relationships would emerge. As such, though there was no statistically significant association between cohabiting and married mothers' prior childbearing and their experiences of parenting, the results do not decisively prove that there is no relationship, only that we found no evidence of such a relationship.

We did not include measures about the quality of the partners' romantic relationship; they were highly correlated with co-parenting relationship quality, and the cross-sectional nature of the data inhibited causal interpretation, as poor relationship quality could lead to poor co-parenting relationship quality and vice versa. We were also unable to include relationship duration due to an error in the skip pattern of the survey that omitted married respondents from being asked questions about their premarital cohabitation experiences. Finally, we acknowledge that our analytical sample – and the FRS generally – is slightly more advantaged than comparable datasets or the population as a whole. Online surveys, like internet usage overall, may be concentrated among more advantaged households and respondents who are disproportionately non-minority. The median income in our analytical sample is high ($60,000-$74,999) relative to the population as a whole, though the lower end of this range does correspond with the median income in 2013 for households with children ($60,700; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018), and a relative large proportion of the mothers were not employed. A slightly higher proportion of our sample was non-Hispanic white compared to a comparable sample in the NSFG. To the extent that socioeconomic advantage cushions familial stress or conflict among stepfamilies (Adler-Baeder, Robertson, & Schramm, 2010) or that white

stepfamilies have different experiences than their non-white counterparts (Stewart, 2007), our results may understate any associations between stepparent status and type and parenting experiences.

Conclusion

Many of today's families are stepfamilies in which there are complex and varied ties and relationships. As parents try to rear children while maintaining romantic relationships, it is important to consider how parents perceive their partners, as conflict over childrearing is often a source of contention in stepfamilies and can increase the risk of dissolution. The current research suggests that parents in a residential stepfamily may be experiencing parenthood quite differently depending on which partner is a stepparent. In particular, mothers' parenting experiences do not seem to be linked to complexity introduced through *their* children but, rather, through their partners' children. Whether this is a gendered phenomenon remains to be seen. It may be that the higher social pressures placed on mothers makes stepmothering seem especially onerous, or it may be that all stepparents perceive their parenting roles as more burdensome than their partners realize. To minimize the possibility of long-term conflicts, it is important for stepparents to vocalize their concerns about their role as stepparents and their perceptions of co-parenting and for biological parents to recognize that stepparents may be unwilling or unprepared for the level of parental involvement that biological parents expect.

Given that family complexity remains high and is unlikely to abate substantially in the future (Manning, Brown, & Stykes, 2014), it would be prudent for future data collection efforts to focus specifically on stepfamilies and related complex family forms or, at a minimum, for existing nationally representative datasets on family behaviors (such as the National Survey of Family Growth or National Longitudinal Survey of Youth) to consider adding questions about

stepfamily experiences. Existing data often contains too few cases of stepfamilies at any given point in time to analyze important nuances (such as variation by visitation or child support, or comparisons of nonresident mothers versus nonresident fathers), yet the lifetime chances of living in a stepfamily are fairly high (Andersson, Thomson, & Duntava, 2017). Additionally, work that includes both partners might help illuminate the extent to which stepfamily perceptions and experiences are gendered and/or dependent on which partner brings children into the union from a past relationship. Thus, although the current research is suggestive that stepparenting may be a source of strain for parents in a stepfamily, more work – with better data – is needed to help identify the underlying processes at play.

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Appendix A. Weighted Descriptive Statistics of Coupled Mothers aged 18-44 in FRS vs NSFG 2011-2015

	FRS	NSFG 2011-2015
Marital Status		
Married	83.7%	77.4%
Cohabiting	16.3%	22.6%
Age	33.71 years	32.67 years
Age of Youngest Child	4.84 years	4.63 years
Both Bio Parents during Adolescence	65.1%	64.6%
Educational Attainment		
Less than High School	8.7%	14.6%
High School/GED	23.9%	21.1%
Some College	30.0%	26.0%
College or More	37.3%	38.2%
Race/Ethnicity		
White	65.7%	60.1%
Black	4.6%	6.8%
Hispanic	20.4%	22.0%
Other/Multiracial	9.4%	11.1%
Employment Status		
Full-time	34.4%	43.2%
Part-time	15.8%	19.4%
Not Employed	44.4%	32.2%
Refused/Mixed Status	5.5%	5.3%
Median Household Income Category	$60,000 to $74,999	$50,000 to $59,999
Unweighted N	620	2,323

Table 1. Weighted Descriptive Statistics of Cohabiting and Married Mothers Whose Children are All Minors and Live in the Household

	Mean | Percent (Std. Err.)
Marital Status	
Married	84.5%
Cohabiting	15.5%
Age	35.09 years
	(0.36)
Age of Youngest Child	5.38 years
	(0.23)
Both Bio Parents during Adolescence	66.8%
Educational Attainment	
Less than High School	8.0%
High School/GED	25.3%
Some College	29.0%
College or More	37.7%
Race/Ethnicity	
White	66.9%
Black	4.5%
Hispanic	20.0%
Other/Multiracial	8.6%
Employment Status	
Full-time	35.1%
Part-time	16.1%
Not Employed	43.6%
Refused/Mixed Status	5.2%
Modal Household Income	12.38
	(0.20)
Unweighted N	679

Table 2. Weighted Descriptive Statistics for Maternal Stress and Perceptions of Co-Parenting by Mother's Own Children and by Stepchildren, N = 679 (Standard Errors in Parentheses)

	Mean Parental Stress (Range 1-5)	Mean Partner's Reliability (Range 1-4)	Percent Agree Parenting is Fair	Evaluation of Partner as Parent Distribution				
				Not Good	Good	Very Good	Excellent	Overall
Overall	2.52	3.61	68.5%	2.6%	18.2%	33.2%	46.0%	
	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	
Mother's Own Children								
Current Relationship Only (N = 537)	2.52	3.64	68.6%	2.7%	15.4%	33.1%	48.9%	81.8%
	(0.05)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)
Prior Relationship Only (N = 76)	2.52	3.41 [a]	70.5%	3.9%	38.6% [a]	26.2%	31.2% [a]	9.6%
	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.08)	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.01)
Both Current and Prior Relationship (N = 66)	2.48	3.56	65.5%	0.7%	21.2%	42.3%	35.7%	8.6%
	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.06)	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.01)
Stepchildren								
No Stepchildren (N = 555)	2.55	3.65	70.2%	2.0%	14.7%	33.7%	49.7%	80.1%
	(0.05)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)
Only Nonresident Stepchildren (N = 49)	2.28	3.52	74.3%	12.8% [b]	24.8%	24.4%	38.0%	8.1%
	(0.17)	(0.11)	(0.02)	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.02)
Any Resident Stepchildren (N = 75)	2.49	3.42 [b]	53.3% [b]	0.0%	37.3% [b]	35.7%	27.0% [b]	11.8%
	(0.11)	(0.12)	(0.02)	(0.00)	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.01)

[a] Significantly different from current relationship only at $p \leq 0.1$ [b] Significantly different from no stepchildren at $p \leq 0.1$

Table 3. Weighted Descriptive Statistics for Maternal Stress and Perceptions of Co-Parenting between Cohabiting and Married Stepfamilies by Stepfamily Type (Standard Errors in Parentheses)

	Mean Parental Stress (Range 1-5)	Mean Partner's Reliability (Range 1-4)	Percent Agree Parenting is Fair	Evaluation of Partner as Parent Distribution			
				Not Good	Good	Very Good	Excellent
Only Mother Has Children (N = 97)							
Cohabiting Stepfamily	2.72	3.42	69.7%	1.6%	17.9%	39.3%	41.2%
	(0.16)	(0.16)	(0.09)	(0.02)	(0.07)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Marital Stepfamily	2.34 [a]	3.52	70.6%	0.9%	31.4%	38.0%	29.7%
	(0.11)	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.01)	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.07)
Only Partner Has Children (N = 79)							
Cohabiting Stepfamily	2.31	3.15	55.2%	0.0%	50.2%	26.0%	23.9%
	(0.15)	(0.23)	(0.18)	(0.00)	(0.18)	(0.17)	(0.12)
Marital Stepfamily	2.33	3.55 [a]	61.5%	7.6%	23.1%	36.0%	33.3%
	(0.17)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.06)	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.08)
Either or Both Partners Has Children (N = 221)							
Cohabiting Stepfamily	2.48	3.43	65.1%	1.1%	27.9%	35.8%	35.2%
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.07)	(0.01)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.07)
Marital Stepfamily	2.41	3.49	64.6%	5.1%	31.2%	32.7%	31.0%
	(0.09)	().08)	(0.06)	(0.03)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.05)

[a] Significantly different from cohabiting stepfamily at $p \leq 0.1$

Table 4. OLS Regression of Maternal Stress and Mother's Evaluation of Partner's Reliability as a Co-Parent, N = 679

	Model 1: Parental Stress (OLS) Coefficients (Std. Err.)		Model 2: Partner's Reliability (OLS) Coefficients (Std. Err.)	
Mother's Own Children				
Current Relationship Only	--	-0.01 (0.13)	--	0.00 (0.09)
Prior Relationship Only	0.22 (0.15)	0.21 (0.18)	-0.13 (0.13)	-0.13 (0.17)
Both Current and Prior Relationship	0.10 (0.13)	--	0.00 (0.09)	--
Stepchildren				
No Stepchildren	--	0.10 (0.12)	--	0.17 (0.10) ǂ
Only Nonresident Stepchildren	-0.19 (0.16)	-0.09 (0.18)	-0.01 (0.11)	0.16 (0.15)
Any Resident Stepchildren	-0.10 (0.12)	--	-0.17 (0.10) ǂ	--
Socioeconomic and Demographic Characteristics				
Marital Status				
Cohabiting	--		--	
Married	0.00 (0.14)		0.06 (0.10)	
Age	0.02 (0.01) *		0.00 (0.00)	
Age of Youngest Bio Child	-0.03 (0.01) *		0.00 (0.01)	
Both Bio Parents during Adolescence	-0.04 (0.10)		-0.02 (0.06)	
Educational Attainment				
Less than High School	-0.35 (0.18) *		-0.08 (0.13)	
High School/GED	--		--	
Some College	-0.02 (0.12)		-0.11 (0.08)	
College or More	-0.06 (0.12)		0.00 (0.07)	
Race-ethnicity				
White	--		--	
Black	0.02 (0.16)		-0.01 (0.16)	
Hispanic	0.28 (0.12) *		-0.11 (0.08)	
Other/Multiracial	0.22 (0.16)		-0.06 (0.08)	
Employment Status				
Full-time	--		--	
Part-time	0.11 (0.12)		-0.01 (0.06)	
Not Employed	0.31 (0.09) **		-0.06 (0.05)	
Refused/Mixed Status	0.03 (0.17)		-0.25 (0.16)	

Household Income		0.01 (0.01)			0.02 (0.01) **	
Intercept	1.58 (0.30) ***		1.67 (0.28) ***	3.60 (0.19) ***		3.43 (0.20) ***
R^2		0.08			0.12	

ǂp ≤ 0.1 *p ≤ 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

Table 5. Logistic Regression of Childcare Fairness and Ordinal Logistic Regression of Overall Evaluation of Partner as a Parent, N = 679

	Model 3: Childcare Fairness (Logistic) Coefficients (Std. Err.)		Model 4: Partner is a Good Parent (Ordinal Logistic) Coefficients (Std. Err.)	
Mother's Own Children				
Current Relationship Only	--	0.05 (0.38)	--	0.31 (0.29)
Prior Relationship Only	0.09 (0.38)	0.13 (0.49)	-0.70 (0.40) ǂ	-0.39 (0.43)
Both Current and Prior Relationship	-0.05 (0.38)	--	-0.31 (0.29)	--
Stepchildren				
No Stepchildren	--	0.74 (0.35) *	--	0.91 (0.28) **
Only Nonresident Stepchildren	0.21 (0.45)	0.96 (0.52) ǂ	-0.81 (0.57)	0.10 (0.57)
Any Resident Stepchildren	-0.74 (0.35) *	--	-0.91 (0.28) ***	--
Socioeconomic and Demographic Characteristics				
Marital Status				
Cohabiting	--		--	
Married	-0.16 (0.32)		-0.30 (0.36)	
Age	0.01 (0.02)		-0.04 (0.02) *	
Age of Youngest Bio Child	0.03 (0.03)		0.03 (0.03)	
Both Bio Parents during Adolescence	-0.37 (0.26)		-0.21 (0.26)	
Educational Attainment				
Less than High School	-0.05 (0.48)		0.25 (0.60)	
High School/GED	--		--	
Some College	-0.05 (0.29)		-0.37 (0.23)	
College or More	0.19 (0.31)		0.08 (0.26)	
Race-ethnicity				
White	--		--	
Black	0.05 (0.55)		0.25 (0.51)	
Hispanic	-0.42 (0.30)		-0.43 (0.24) ǂ	
Other/Multiracial	0.37 (0.38)		-0.26 (0.39)	
Employment Status				
Full-time	--		--	
Part-time	-0.03 (0.31)		0.03 (0.31)	
Not Employed	0.31 (0.26)		-0.14 (0.23)	

Refused/Mixed Status		-0.75 (0.50)			-0.51 (0.34)	
Household Income		0.05 (0.03)			0.08 (0.03) **	
Intercept	0.14 (0.70)		-0.65 (0.79)	n/a	n/a	
Thresholds						
Cut 1		n/a		-5.03 ***		-3.80 ***
Cut 2				-2.63 *		-1.40 *
Cut 3				-0.98 ǂ		0.24

ǂp ≤ 0.1 *p ≤ 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001