Father Reflections on Doing Family in Stepfamilies

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The authors would like to thank the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) for financial support (Grant G020115N).

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Abstract

Objective: To explore fathers' experiences as biological parents in father–stepmother families.

Background: Biological parents play an important role in the formation and development of stepfamily relationships, but little is known about fathers in stepfamilies.

Method: In-person interviews were conducted with ten Belgian fathers. Interviews were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Results: Three themes emerged from the data: (a) Reflecting on Children's Experiences and Transitions, (b) Pursuing a Shared Family Understanding, and (c) Innovating New Ways of Doing Fatherhood and Family. The first theme centers on fathers' concerns about the impact family transitions may have on their children. The second theme centers on fathers' pursuit of a shared understanding that clarifies family roles and expectations within the stepfamily. The last theme addresses the creativity of these fathers as they co-construct new stepfamily and fatherhood identities in the absence of culturally-ascribed norms.

Conclusion: Given their connecting role as parent and partner, biological fathers in stepfamilies are key to the formation and development of a new family narrative.

Implications: Findings contribute to family practitioners' understanding of how fathers experience stepfamily life.

Keywords: stepfamilies, fathers and fatherhood, parenting, doing family, qualitative research

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Recent literature reviews have demonstrated that stepfamily research is dominated by studies reporting on mother–stepfather households (Jensen & Howard, 2015; Pylyser, Buysse, & Loeys, 2018; Sweeney, 2010). Consequently, fathers as biological parents in stepfamilies have largely been overlooked in the stepfamily literature. However, recent demographic trends show a shift from mothers with sole physical custody of children toward joint physical custody, resulting in more children of divorce who live a substantial amount of time with their fathers as well as their mothers (Bauserman, 2002; Cancian, Meyer, Brown, & Cook, 2014; Sodermans, Vanassche, & Matthijs, 2013). Because fathers with joint (or sole) physical custody of children take on the role of the biological parent in the process of stepfamily formation and maintenance, the present qualitative study focuses on fathers' lived experiences in the role of biological parent within stepfamilies. Below, we outline the broader theoretical framework of doing family and elaborate with literature on the biological parent in stepfamilies to demonstrate the pertinence of the present study.

Theoretical Framework: Doing Family

In contemporary Western society, family structures reflect an increasing diversity and complexity. The increased prevalence of a variety of nontraditional family structures has challenged scholars to advance the theoretical lenses through which family can be seen (Eurostat, 2015; Weigel, 2008). A shift in these theoretical perspectives is marked by Holstein and Gubrium's (1999) distinction between the essentialist concept of *the family* on the one hand, considering family as if it were a determinate and actual entity with observable boundaries, and the postmodern concept of *family* on the other hand, conceptualizing family as being a more fluid concept that is mainly constructed through everyday interactions and meaning-making processes of the people involved (Gergen, 1994; Weigel, 2008). Within the latter social constructionist perspective, the present qualitative study draws on the theoretical

framework of doing family (Nelson, 2006; Sarkisian, 2006), which emphasizes the everyday interactional work people undertake to co-construct and maintain their family relationships (Sarkisian, 2006). A family does not merely exist because of biological or legal ties between family members. Rather, family members themselves define and legitimate their family identity by creating family ties; negotiating family boundaries; and assigning rights, responsibilities, and roles to each family member as they interact with one another, outsiders, and society. However, given the rather ambiguous roles and expectations of relationships in nontraditional families (e.g., Cherlin, 1978; Ganong & Coleman, 2017), processes of doing family are argued to become especially apparent in these nontraditional families (Nelson, 2006; Sarkisian, 2006), indicating the relevance of applying the theoretical lens of doing family to stepfamily research.

The Biological Parent in Stepfamilies

Stepfamilies, in which at least one parent has a child or children from a previous relationship (Ganong & Coleman, 2017), are becoming increasingly common (Eurostat, 2015; Sweeney, 2010). Accordingly, family scholars have increasingly been conducting research on stepfamilies. Possibly due to the ambiguity associated with stepfamily roles and the lack of institutionalized roles, relations, and expectations in stepfamilies (Cherlin, 1978), earlier studies often implicitly as well as explicitly compared stepfamily structures with the well-known normative model of a nuclear family (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). However, this deficit-comparison approach implies an emphasis on the deficits in stepfamilies rather than on the facilitating factors that may enhance positive stepfamily experiences and outcomes (Coleman et al., 2000; Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Fortunately, recent studies have shifted toward a stepfamily-focused approach (e.g., King, Thorsen, & Amato, 2014) by focusing on the within-family processes unique to stepfamilies. In doing so, researchers are able to provide insights not only into what challenges may be normative to stepfamily life, but also

into what facilitating factors may help stepfamily members cope with these normative challenges (Coleman, Ganong, & Russell, 2013).

Furthermore, inclusion criteria for participants in stepfamily research also tend to be characterized by the emphasis on possible deficits in stepfamilies. Because relationships between stepparents and children tend to be considered as potentially more problematic than those of biological parent–child relationships and thus more essential to family closeness, stepfamily researchers have been focusing their attention on these step-relationships and the role of the stepparent, rather than on the parent–child relationships and the role of the biological parent in the stepfamily (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Despite extensive coverage of research on the experiences of stepparents and stepchildren, only few studies have explicitly investigated the experiences of resident biological parents (Weaver & Coleman, 2010). However, both quantitative research based on a nationally representative sample of adolescents in stepfather families within the United States (King, Amato, & Lindstrom, 2015; King, Boyd, & Thorsen, 2015; King et al., 2014) and qualitative research (Pylyser et al., 2018) have suggested that biological parents are key to the formation and development of stepfamily relationships and closeness, given their connecting role as parent and partner in the stepfamily.

Notably, Weaver and Coleman (2010) conducted a grounded theory study based on 24 remarried biological mothers to understand experiences of the biological parent's connecting role in stepfamilies. The key aim in doing family for these mothers was creating the best possible family environment for their children and protecting them from being misunderstood or judged too harshly by their stepfathers. The mothers acted as defenders of their children and assumed a gatekeeper role by controlling access of the stepfather to their children. They also worked as mediators to solve and even prevent conflicts by explaining each family member to the other, a role that may become a source of stress over time and may intensify

feelings of being torn between commitment to their new partner and loyalty to their biological children (Afifi, 2003; Golish, 2003).

However, given that the majority of stepfamily research is based on samples of mother–stepfather families (e.g., Sweeney, 2010), it remains unclear whether these experiences of biological mothers also apply to biological fathers in stepfamilies or are mainly due to an artefact of the motherhood myth (i.e., ideology whereby women are held responsible for family relationships; King, Boyd, & Thorsen, 2015). Therefore, the present qualitative study was designed to contribute to the stepfamily literature by providing additional insights into how resident biological fathers in father–stepmother families experience their family life and define their family identity.

The Present Study: Fathers in Stepfamilies

To the best of our knowledge, no previous studies have investigated how resident biological fathers in stepfamilies perceive and make sense of their family life. To address this gap in the literature, we conducted an interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2015) to explore in detail how fathers in father–stepmother households give meaning to their personal and social world. The study was situated within the theoretical framework of doing family because this approach emphasizes that people make sense of their family life by *doing* family; that is, by constructing, maintaining, and defining family ties and roles through interaction (Nelson, 2006; Sarkisian, 2006). Therefore, the main purpose of this study was to gain in-depth understanding of how fathers in stepfamilies construct their family identity and their own role as parent and partner in that family. In this respect, the central research question was: How do fathers *do family* in the context of stepfamily life?

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of ten Belgian fathers in heterosexual stepfamilies with one or more children from a previous relationship between 3 and 20 years of age. They formed a reasonably homogeneous sample: they were all White, middle-class fathers between 31 and 48 years of age and living in a stepfamily in the Flemish part of Belgium. Four of them were also stepfathers, and five were expecting or already had children with their current partner. Two fathers had sole physical custody of their children from a previous relationship; the other eight had joint physical custody arrangements with their co-parents. In Belgium, joint physical custody, in which the child typically spends roughly equal amounts of time with each parent, has been considered the default residential model post-divorce since 2006 (Sodermans et al., 2013). Table 1 gives an overview of the participants' characteristics and family composition; pseudonyms are used for participants in the table and throughout this article to enhance confidentiality.

Procedure

After approval was received from the appropriate research ethics committee at Ghent University, fathers were recruited via announcements posted on social media. Those who responded were invited to a semi-structured interview about their experiences as a parent in a stepfamily. The interviews were conducted in Dutch by the first author during a home visit and lasted 45 to 75 minutes. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions about stepfamily composition, experiences of doing family processes, and interpretations of the concept of family. When necessary, probes were used to facilitate participants' experiential accounts (Smith & Osborn, 2015). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. These transcriptions served as the raw data of our analysis.

Analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a qualitative research method that draws on the theoretical principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith & Osborn, 2015). This approach is intended to achieve an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and how they make sense of those experiences (phenomenology), while also providing the researcher an active role in the process of interpretation (hermeneutics). Thus, IPA involves a double hermeneutical process: the researcher tries to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Finally, the focus is on understanding how particular people have experienced particular events before identifying patterns across cases or producing general statements (idiography).

Because of the interpretative paradigm of our analysis, personal experiences or the researchers' theoretical framework may potentially influence the interpretations. Therefore, to enhance the credibility and validity of the findings, the second and last author served as auditors to challenge the transparency and rigor of the first author's analytical process (Morse, 2015). The third author supervised the writing process of the present paper but was not actively involved in the analyses of the interviews. The first author is a clinical psychologist with a research interest in how family narratives are constructed; the second author is a clinical psychologist, family therapist, and professor of clinical psychology with experience in qualitative research; and the fourth author is a professor of clinical psychology, mainly working from a systems theory perspective.

Consistent with the idiographic approach, we started by analyzing the first case using the step-by-step approach as described by Smith and Osborn (2015) before analyzing subsequent cases. To become as familiar as possible with the data, the transcript was read numerous times by the first author and the margin was used to make initial notes on the

participant's account (e.g., "this father considers it important to be present at every soccer training of his son"). In the second phase, based on both the data and these initial notes, the first author documented emerging themes (e.g., "need for quality time with child(ren)"). These emerging themes reflected a slightly higher level of abstraction, but nonetheless retained enough particularity to be grounded in the participant's accounts. The end product of this phase was an initial list of themes in chronological order. Next, the first author aimed to make sense of the connections between the emerging themes, and therefore reordered the list in a more analytical or theoretical way. Some of the themes clustered together and some emerged as superordinate themes. This clustering of emerging themes involved an iterative process of constantly ensuring the agreement between the participant's actual words and our interpretations. This phase resulted in a coherently ordered table of themes in which the themes and their superordinate themes were identified by adding an identifier and example quotes to each instance. This process was repeated for each participant. Each participant's table of themes was carefully reviewed by the fourth author, who served as the primary auditor. Finally, all analyses were brought together to look for convergence as well as individuality. A master table of group themes was constructed. The second author, who served as the secondary auditor, challenged the construction of this master table of group themes via counterexamples and insights on a more theoretical level until final themes were agreed upon.

Results

The systematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews in which fathers in stepfamilies talked about their family life led to the emergence of three superordinate themes: (a) Reflecting on Children's Experiences and Transitions, (b) Pursuing a Shared Family Understanding, and (c) Innovating New Ways of Doing Fatherhood and Family. The first theme illustrates the reflective stance fathers in stepfamilies adopt concerning their children

and their family life. The second theme explores fathers' pursuit of a shared understanding of family roles and expectations. Finally, the last theme addresses the complexity that comes with doing family and fatherhood in a nontraditional family and how fathers seem to reinvent their concepts of family and fatherhood.

Reflecting on Children's Experiences and Transitions

The narratives of all fathers in our study demonstrated an intensive reflective process about the impact past family transitions such as divorce and the entrance of a stepparent in the family may have on their children. The fathers felt worried about how their children experienced these family transitions and their new family situation. Alex said he would

> sometimes worry about that in the darkest hours of the night. . . . That my children won't be able to get used to the new family. That I imagine our family too romantically and that they somehow get the feeling that they are not welcome here.

Also, the fathers tended to take full responsibility for the family transitions and the possible impact on their children by emphasizing that the family transitions were the result of their own decisions regarding their partner relationships. For example, David said:

> My daughter did not want her parents to divorce and she did not choose to have a new stepmother. Those are my choices and I don't want Maya [daughter] to be the victim of my choices.

As the quote illustrates, the fathers recognized their own responsibility and strived to minimize the impact these family transitions unintentionally had on their children. Nevertheless, the fathers were aware of the flexibility they expected from their children to make the new family situation work. The following description of daily life changes shows Ben's underlying concern regarding the adjustment his sons needed to make in the new family:

> My children were like, "Why do we need to do the dishes all of a sudden? We actually never needed to earlier." It is very complicated. . . . [They feel like,] "You have a wife with kids, but in the end, we are screwed because we have to start doing dishes."

In three families, the father's partner was pregnant at the time of the interview. The anticipation of this future family transition further intensified fathers' reflectivity on the position of their children from a previous relationship in the stepfamily. The fathers recognized the birth of a new baby as a challenge associated with stepfamily life and felt that they would need to be aware of any impact it had on their other children. Alex used a dividing-the-pie metaphor to illustrate his vigilance toward ensuring that all his children received equal attention and love:

> They should know that the baby will be like a brother or sister who I will love as much as I love them. But not *more* than I love them! My love is not like a pie that I have to divide between them. No, everyone gets the same; I mean, everyone has his own pie.

Trying to cope with their concerns about past and future family transitions, all fathers explicitly focused on their children's best interests when doing family. Their main goal in doing family was creating a safe and loving family environment for their children, as Adam described in the following quote:

> My children have a safe home with our family, which is actually the most important thing (the fact that it feels like a safe place here). They know, "When my dad is not here, we will be cared for." When [their stepmom] is not here, they will be cared for. When we are all together, they will be cared for as well. That is what a safe home is about.

Overall, all fathers' narratives demonstrated the presence of some concerns regarding the impact of the complex new family situation and family transitions on their children. Nevertheless, the fathers also believed that the stepfamily could be a new and secure start and

a possibly enriching family environment for their children's development. Chris said his daughter was learning that family can be different than "the normal way of life, as prescribed in the culture we live in" and that "other ways of family life . . . are fine as well."

Pursuing a Shared Family Understanding

The narratives of fathers in our study demonstrated a high diversity in possible ways of doing family across stepfamilies. However, within their own stepfamily, the fathers seemed to strive for a shared family understanding that explicated family members' expectations and clarified the family roles in the stepfamily.

> Nathan: We had to agree on a plan—an arrangement that laid out how we would deal with this new family—and everyone must feel okay with that plan. That is important, I think, and not only at the beginning; we must be able to constantly talk about and adapt the plan because a plan that is good now won't necessarily be fine in 2 weeks.

Like Nathan, the fathers felt the need to reach a consensus on a plan that outlined what stepfamily members should do and how they should relate to one another. Alex further emphasized how open communication helped to "figure out what everyone expects from one another in the new stepfamily." As he explained,

> The key to success in every relationship is communication. First and foremost, you define what everyone expects from one another in your stepfamily. Do you want your girlfriend to accept and respect your children, but who is primarily your partner and only helps you with the boys when she's asked to, as in my case? Or do you want a stepmother who takes care of your kids, in the broad sense?

Ben pointed out that this consensus did not necessarily mean that all family members should have the same opinion regarding doing family in their stepfamily. Rather, he and his partner sometimes agreed to disagree because they "do not always have the same values and norms or the same opinion on parenting." Nonetheless, for him, successfully co-constructing a

new shared family understanding and knowing each other's expectations seemed more important than actually having the same expectations.

When co-constructing this shared family understanding, fathers tended to agree on their own role; little variation was found in how they experienced their father role in the stepfamily. Overall, fathers—who used terms such as "connection man" and "mediator" to describe the role they played between their partner and their children—acknowledged that the main responsibility for creating this new shared family understanding lay with them because of their position as both parent and partner in the stepfamily, and that "reconciling those interests can be hard sometimes" because "they have different interests" (Nathan). Indeed, most fathers spoke of the difficulties their role as mediator entailed—as Alex stated, "you sometimes feel pulled between two people you love"—but they seemed to embrace the role as a necessary challenge nonetheless given their position in the stepfamily.

Only Jacob explicitly stated a desire for a more balanced approach wherein all stepfamily members would take responsibility in the family-making process. However, he also indicated that it would be difficult to let go of that role because "taking on that mediating role is very often like a reflex" and "letting go is not that easy because, at the end, you also want the conflict to be solved."

Thus, these fathers described themselves as the driving forces behind the pursuit of a shared family understanding. Clarifying the position of their partner in the stepfamily and fostering small family activities are two subtasks within this pursuit of a shared family narrative.

Clarifying the stepmother's role. In contrast to the rather unambiguous conceptualization of their own role, fathers' conceptualization of the role of their partner in the stepfamily seemed to vary in terms of degree of partner involvement with the children. In some stepfamilies, the stepmother was ascribed an outsider role. Fathers whose partners were

generally uninvolved in child-related decisions mentioned two motives for this role construction. First, these fathers did not want to bother their partner with the additional household chores children required, such as cleaning their bedroom or laundering their clothes. They emphasized that their children were their own responsibility and they aimed to arrange care for the children without encumbering the partner when they were not available themselves. Second, given the limited time together because of joint custody, these fathers also tended to cling to the these moments with their children and wanted to spend as much time as possible with them, as David put it: "I sometimes need an afternoon alone with my daughter [so] my partner then goes to [visit] her parents."

Next, the majority of these fathers applied the model of friendship to clarify the stepmother role. That is, they encouraged the development of a close relationship between their partner and their children and appreciated the support of their partner in dividing the household chores. However, they were also clear in their perspective that their children had a mother in their ex-partner and that the new partner should therefore not take on a mothering role with the children. For example, Nathan said his partner "is not supposed to play mommy" and that he would "prefer that she be like a good friend to him; another adult on whom he can rely" when needed.

Finally, only one father in our study (Dan) ascribed a typical warm mother role to his partner. Given the unreliability of his ex-partner, his own assumed role as breadwinner, and the fact that he had formed a stepfamily with his partner for more than 10 years, the stepmother had "cared for the children a lot" and he suspected that "if his partner were to be gone, the children would probably miss the affection . . . because that is part of the mothering role." Interestingly, however, Dan's narrative revealed a fundamental ambivalence about this ascribed mother role when he (perhaps unwittingly) made a distinction between social and

biological parenthood. Specifically, after he and his partner had a child together in the new stepfamily, he said that then his partner "all of a sudden felt *real* maternal love."

Fostering small family activities. With regard to constructing and maintaining the new family understanding that clarified roles and expectations, fathers barely mentioned big rituals such as marriage or moving in together as methods to instill this shared family understanding. Instead, they tended to focus on small everyday family activities such as shared walks, meals, and errands such as going to the supermarket as a family. Although small everyday activities can be useful for maintaining a sense of family belonging in all family structures, the lack of a shared family history in stepfamilies may have intensified the meaning of these activities for creating a shared family narrative. Jacob, for example, said that they "get some [family] history by" doing some "really silly things" together as a means to "creating our own family culture."

Engaging in these activities as a family helped fathers in their pursuit of a shared family narrative but also enhanced family member belonging and stepfamily members' feelings of mattering within the family realm. For example, one father described playing volleyball together with his children, his partner, and her children as moments when they really felt like a family. Moreover, these fathers demonstrated their care for their children by making time to engage in shared activities. Again, this seemed not to be about big efforts but rather about everyday acts, such as the bedtime ritual, repairing the printer, or playing games together.

Innovating New Ways of Doing Fatherhood and Family

Although fathers in our study felt optimistic about their family situation and their stepfamily functioning, they acknowledged the complexity of doing family in the context of stepfamily life. As Jacob said, "one really needs a lot of time and energy, to make them work."

None of these fathers described the transition to stepfamily life as easy; rather, they described the formation of their stepfamily as a "real journey," and accentuated the time and energy it took to define roles, boundaries, and relationships in their new family because "stepfamilies may become the new normal but that does not mean stepfamilies are something natural, something easy" (Alex). Although stepfamilies are indeed becoming increasingly common, that did not seem to ease the underlying complexity these fathers experienced when trying to construct a new family identity without knowing what a stepfamily "naturally" could or should look like. Therefore, we considered fathers in our study to be innovating fathers in that they searched for new ways of doing family by reinventing their family identity and their father identity.

Reinventing their family identity. When trying to explain how they thought about their family, some fathers tended to compare their family situation with the more well-known concept of the first-time family, to which they referred as a "normal" or a "standard" family. When doing so, fathers seemed to feel ambivalent, as they focused on how similar their family was to these so-called normal families but also described situations uniquely inherent to the structure of a stepfamily.

> Adam: Actually, we are just like a normal family. There is nothing special. . . . When I had to leave a week for my work, the children were here with [my partner]. [That said,] my ex was furious; she was like, "How can you do that to your children, leaving them with her?" You always have to think about [the ex's likely] opinion of your own decisions, which can be hard sometimes.

When Marc talked about his family rituals, a similar kind of ambivalence was recognizable:

> Our weekends are like in standard families: driving the kids to the sport club, the youth movement, friends' birthday parties. . . . Like other families, if we have the time, we do something together as a family on the weekend, but it also happens that I

> do something with my children and she does something with hers. That way, now and then, we disconnect to create a bit of peace and to maintain our own familiar routines.

On the one hand fathers felt they acted like a normal family, but on the other hand they described situations inherent to the unique structure of a stepfamily that challenged them to engage in new ways of doing family. For instance, as the excerpt from Adam illustrates, fathers in stepfamilies cannot ignore the ongoing link they have with the ex- partner regarding shared parental responsibilities. Even when the children lived with the father full-time, as was the case in the family of Dan and Jacob, the ex-partner had an impact on these fathers' stepfamily life through the financial implications of the lawsuit Dan was involved in with his ex-partner or Jacob's worries whether not having contact with their mother may negatively affect his children.

Similarly, Marc conveyed the ambivalence these fathers felt between feeling like a "normal" family and how stepfamilies are structurally different than nuclear families. Accordingly, he and other fathers tried to balance investment in the stepfamily with respecting pre-existing parent–child subsystems by often doing things together as a family but also setting aside time to do things only with their children.

> Ben: I went skiing with my boys only. Dad and his three sons. To me, that is important in our new family, the men doing something together. However, last year, we went all together, with my wife and her little ones, in a huge chalet, so we were all together at night. That was also a really nice holiday. Both holidays were nice, but different.

Reinventing their father identity. Inherent in navigating the complexity of constructing a new family identity, these fathers were simultaneously trying to figure out how to be a father in a nontraditional family and thereby reinventing their own father identity. For instance, given that most fathers in our study had joint custody of their children, most children only resided in the paternal household every other week. Consequently, these fathers were

worried about the effect of the decreased time together with their children on their (future) parent–child relationship. Nathan said that this "was very hard" because "it will never be the intention of a father to see his children only half of the time." Thus, the traditional concept of fatherhood in the nuclear family did not provide adequate guidelines for these fathers upon which to construct their father identity and left them looking for ways to be good fathers in the context of living in a stepfamily household with a joint custody parenting arrangement.

In an attempt to bridge the gap between their idea of how a father should be and their actual parenting situation, the fathers in our study described "compensating" for lost time. For example, despite the high investment it took given his busy schedule, Nathan tried to be present at every soccer training and match of his son, especially during the weeks his son resided with his mother. Ben acknowledged that he needed the time spent with his children "to be quality time," and consequently he said his children might be "a bit spoiled" because he would overindulge them to make up for the decreased time they were able to spend together.

Discussion

As recent demographic trends indicate, children are increasingly likely to reside at least part time with their biological father and his new partner post-divorce (Cancian et al., 2014; Sodermans et al., 2013). By conducting interviews with fathers in these father–stepmother families, the present study contributes to the stepfamily research literature by illuminating the largely neglected perspective of biological fathers on everyday family life in stepfamilies. Our findings provide insight into how these fathers make sense of their stepfamily life and the different processes in which they engage when doing family: reflecting on children's experiences and transitions, pursuing a shared family understanding, and innovating new ways of doing fatherhood and family. These results yield three key implications.

First, fathers in our study were all aware of their children's position in the stepfamily and expressed some concerns when talking about the effect of past or future family transitions on their children. To cope with these concerns, the fathers focused on their children's best interests; as they told us, the key aim in doing family was creating a safe family environment for their children. This active commitment to parenting is in line with the findings of Weaver and Coleman (2010), the only study we are aware of that has explicitly investigated the role of the biological mother in stepfamily life. In these mothers' narratives, the focus upon mothering was a central focus, but the mothers took their commitment to nurturing and protecting a step further by assuming a gatekeeper role that was less prominent in the narratives of our fathers. Whereas the mothers tended to control access of the stepfather to their children, fathers in our study did not describe protecting their children by explicitly restricting the stepmother's access to them.

Weaver and Coleman (2010) relate mothers' self-ascribed gatekeeper role to the cultural belief that mothers are responsible for children's well-being and are quickly blamed when children's outcomes are negative. Although fathers in our study clearly considered their children's outcomes when doing family in their stepfamily, this cultural belief may be less prominent for fathers given that the fathers in our study did not engage in gatekeeping behaviors. Alternatively, any perceived potential threat to children may be less among fathers toward stepmothers than among mothers toward stepfathers.

In any case, our results demonstrate the leading role fathers take in their stepfamily when doing family, and thus provide a tentative indication that not only mothers should be seen as responsible for establishing and maintaining family relationships in stepfamilies (King, Boyd, & Thorsen, 2015). As our results suggest, fathers in stepfamilies also assume the role of mediator and interpreter, indicating that parents' central position in the stepfamily should be considered a characteristic of the role of the biological parent in a stepfamily, rather

than a sole artefact of the cultural ideology of the motherhood myth (King, Boyd, & Thorsen, 2015; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). However, these conclusions are tentative given that they depend on solely two qualitative studies that focused on the perspective of biological parents in stepfamilies. Therefore, further exploration of the similarities and differences between fathers and mothers in stepfamilies would be a fruitful area for future stepfamily research.

The second implication of our findings involves the importance fathers ascribe to co-constructing a shared family understanding when doing family in their stepfamily. The narratives of our fathers suggest that a stable and common foundation as a family in which practical issues are agreed upon is needed to be able to live together and accept future differences. In family systems theory, this shared family understanding can be related to the concept of family rules (Jackson, 1965). Family rules provide guidelines for future family interactions and help set up family roles to provide regularity and stability in the relationships between family members. Family rules are important in all forms of family, however, most family members tend to be unaware of the importance of these family rules in their daily family life, as it is often difficult for families to identify their own rules (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1996; Jackson, 1965). Given that installing and maintaining a new family narrative is a central developmental task for stepfamilies (Papernow, 2018), it may be that stepfamily members feel more aware of the presence and purpose of family rules in their day-to-day family functioning.

In line with Watzlawick's second basic axiom in his theory on communication, which states that every communication has a content and a relationship aspect (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967), this shared family understanding not only includes the literal meaning of stepfamily members' agreements or family rules but also seems to be about how stepfamily members see their relations to one another. This is closely linked to meta-communication (communication about how to interpret the communication; Watzlawick et al., 1967), which

has been one of the most frequently-mentioned methods to instill a new family narrative, both by the fathers in our study and within the extant stepfamily research literature (e.g., Golish, 2003; Pylyser et al., 2018). In addition to meta-communication, shared family activities were important when fathers were talking about installing and maintaining the new family narrative. In line with previous research, our results indicate that the essence of feeling like a family lies in ordinary and everyday family activities, such as having a meal together or playing together (Pylyser et al., 2018).

Finally, as family is a socially constructed concept, cultural or societal perspectives influence the way people experience their own family life (Weigel, 2008). For example, fathers in our study tended to compare their stepfamily situation with the nuclear family. Given that the ideal of the nuclear family fails to provide guidelines for coping with those situations unique and inherent to the structure of stepfamilies (Papernow, 2018), and the lack of clear guidelines for doing family in stepfamilies, these fathers were forced to reinvent their concepts of family and fatherhood. The perceived lack of social guidelines may partly contribute to the complexity fathers experience when doing family but may also yield an opportunity to reinvent one's stepfamily identity in a unique and uniquely suitable fashion for each father. From a narrative lens (White & Epston, 1990), most fathers in our study were trying to move away from problem-saturated stories of stepfamily life in favor of a new family story that is helpful to and functional for all stepfamily members. It would be worthwhile to further explore how stepfamily members experience the lack of social guidelines on doing family in a stepfamily and what would be helpful for them as they pursue their own adaptive family narrative. Furthermore, given that individuals make sense of their family life within their social and cultural context (Weigel, 2008), fathers' narratives about their family life in our study have to be situated within the given social and cultural context of Belgium. Most notably, Belgian law recommends joint physical custody as the preferred post-

divorce residential model (Sodermans et al., 2013). This gender-neutral parenting laws give Belgian fathers the opportunity to become more involved in their children's lives and may have colored the results of our analysis.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although much was learned about doing family in father–stepmother families, this study is not without its limitations. First, given the study's sole focus on the perspective of the fathers in stepfamilies, exploring how stepmothers or children experience the co-construction of the shared family understanding is not possible within the scope of this study. Although the fathers indicated that all family members supported the shared family consensus, this statement should be understood within their experience and should not be taken as an objective statement of fact that stepmothers or other family members fully endorsed the shared family agreement. Therefore, a study in which multiple family members are interviewed could help clarify the nature of this co-construction process and gain insight into all family members' lived experience with this family agreement. Second, although our results demonstrate various ways of doing family in stepfamilies, all fathers in our study were generally satisfied with and highly involved in their family life. This may represent selection bias in our sample, and therefore it would be worthwhile to clarify whether our findings are valid for stepfamilies with higher levels of distress. For example, in high-conflict stepfamilies, a shared agreement for some family members to not be involved with other family members could be a healthy way of doing family in that particular context.

Practical Implications

Despite these limitations, our results provide a nuanced understanding of fathers' experiences in stepfamilies and lead to several practical implications. First, our results indicate fathers' high reflective capacities and the investment these fathers made to create the best possible family environment for their children. They described this as inherent to

fatherhood, but nonetheless struggled balancing their children as priorities with their own desire for a new partner relationship. Supporting fathers who are going through this process by acknowledging and unpacking the complexity of maintaining a bond with their children in the new family situation while simultaneously developing a new partner relationship may be experienced as helpful by these fathers. Also, these fathers attributed great value to small everyday family activities in the development of stepfamily life. Encouraging fathers to reinstate shared activities or small family rituals may help them to overcome challenges when they are trying to construct a new shared family identity. A final clinical implication stems from the importance these fathers attributed to reaching a shared family understanding that clarifies family members' roles and expectations. Helping fathers and their stepfamily members think through and communicate about expectations of one another may facilitate the process of co-constructing a shared foundation. However, research is needed to identify the factors that facilitate this process in stepfamilies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, fathers in our study described taking on a central and mediating role between partner and children in stepfamily formation and maintenance processes. Thus, the cultural ideology promoting women as responsible for family relationships seems to not hold true in stepfamilies, where biological parents may fill that role, regardless of gender. Research designed to explore possible gender differences in how biological parents conceptualize their role in stepfamily formation would be worthwhile to further flesh out structural versus gender differences between nuclear families and stepfamilies.

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Table 1
Participant Characteristics

				Age and gender of		
Name	Age	Family status	Years in stepfamily	Biological children	Stepchildren	Mutual children
Nathan	38	Cohabiting	1.2	8M		0[b]
Dan[a]	39	Married	10.5	15F, 11F		7M, 4F
Jacob[a]	48	Cohabiting	2.5	19F, 18F, 16F	15F	
David	31	Cohabiting	0.7	3F		
Chris	36	Cohabiting	3.1	4F		0[b]
Jason	41	Cohabiting	5.9	10M	14F	
Alex	40	Cohabiting	0.7	13M, 9M		0[b]
Marc	36	Married	2.1	7M, 4M	8M, 5M	
Ben	45	Cohabiting	3.9	20M, 19M, 17M	20F, 15F, 10M, 8F	
Adam	40	Married	5.0	16M, 9F, 7M		

Note. M = male; F = female.
[a]Father had full custody. [b]Partner was pregnant at the time of the interview.