

Stepparents and Parenting Stress: The Roles of Gender, Marital Quality, and Views about Gender Roles

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Previous research suggests that stepparenting can be stressful, although the mechanisms that contribute to the experience of parenting stress in stepfamilies are less clear. This study examines gender, marital quality, and views about gendered family roles as correlates of parenting stress among 310 stepmothers, stepfathers, and biological mothers and fathers. Findings suggest that stepparents, and especially stepmothers, experience higher levels of parenting stress than biological parents. Findings also suggest that less traditional views about gendered family roles and higher dyadic adjustment are associated with lower parenting stress for stepparents, particularly in combination. Stepparents reporting both of these protective factors were indistinguishable in terms of parenting stress from biological parents. These findings indicate potential pathways to mitigate the stress associated with stepparenting.

Keywords: Stepfamily; Marital quality; Gender; Parenting stress

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INTRODUCTION

Estimates of the prevalence of binuclear family arrangements (i.e., a family comprised of two households formed by a divorced couple, their children, and each partner's new spouse) indicate that stepparenting is an increasingly common parenting role (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). Research suggests that adjusting to a binuclear family arrangement is stressful for children and parents, both of whom must renegotiate family roles and relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Sweeney, 2010). While stressful for all family members, stepparents may be particularly vulnerable to the stress associated with their new parenting role; in fact research has identified that stepmothers experience more parenting stress even than other at-risk groups, including parents of children with behavioral disorders like ADHD (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). Parenting stress is not only problematic for parents themselves, but can result in less effective, warm, and sensitive parenting (Ponnet et al., 2013) and, as a result, may be associated with poorer functioning among children and families as a whole (for a review, see Deater-Deckard, 1998). Some research has even suggested that high levels of parenting stress can interrupt important developmental processes, such as the development of theory of mind and social skills, in young children (Guajardo, Snyder, & Petersen, 2009). Consequently, identifying the factors that contribute to parenting stress is an important empirical and clinical objective.

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Previous research has identified that a number of family and individual factors can contribute to stress among stepparents, including a lack of boundaries and role clarity (Gosselin, 2010; Sweeney, 2010), both familial and societal expectations (Fine & Schwebel, 1992; Nielsen, 1999), and tense relationships with other family members (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). However, the current literature is lacking a systemic understanding of the ways in which social identities and roles, as well as associated cultural and individual expectations, interact with interpersonal processes to shape stepparents' experiences. In other words, stepparenting may be best understood from a social systems perspective, which considers the potential interplay of social and cultural roles, family relationships and functioning, and individual beliefs and values (Bowen, 1961; Hetherington, 1992; Nielsen, 1999). This study aims to help to fill this gap by adopting a multi-level, social systems approach that examines social identities (gender, parenting role), individual expectations related to these identities (views about gender and family), and interpersonal functioning (marital quality) in a sample of stepmothers, stepfathers, and biological mothers and fathers. While these variables reflect only some of many potential contributors to parenting stress, they do encompass a number of processes that have been identified as important to individual and family well-being in both biological and stepfamilies. Furthermore, this is the first study to our knowledge that examines these factors in a single, inclusive model allowing for direct comparisons of the relative contributions of factors representing different systemic levels.

At the sociocultural level, general social categories, such as gender, have an immense impact on individuals' lives. While the breadth of feminist thought on the role of gender in individual and family functioning is beyond the scope of this discussion, gender is considered by feminist scholars to be the "linchpin" of family functioning, such that it shapes all other family processes and roles (Lorber, 1996). More specifically, both empirical and theoretical work predict that people occupying two marginalized roles, such as stepparents who are women, may experience a greater degree of stress than people occupying either one of these marginalized roles (e.g., biological mothers or stepfathers) individually (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991; Hill-Collins, 2000). Thus, in general, stepmothers may be more vulnerable to the stresses associated with stepparenting and may have access to fewer supports and buffers than stepfathers do. Some research has supported this possibility by suggesting, for example, that stepmothers experience more parenting stress than biological mothers (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011) and stepfathers (for a review, see Nielsen, 1999).

On the level of the dyad, marital quality has been established as an important determinant of parenting outcomes for biological parents and stepparents. Among biological parents, positive and supportive marital relationships have been found to buffer against mental health problems and promote parenting efficacy (Katz & Gottman, 1996; Petch, Halford, Creedy, & Gamble, 2012) as well as child psychological well-being (Wieland & Baker, 2010). Similarly, among stepparents, support for their parenting efforts in general, and from their spouses in particular, may buffer against the negative mental health outcomes associated with stepparenting (Shapiro & Stewart, 2012) and high overall quality of the marital relationship may ease parents' and children's transition into a binuclear family (Whitsett & Land, 1992).

While marital dyadic adjustment is important for all parents, it may be more important for stepparents than it is for biological parents. Although it has not been examined directly, there are numerous theoretical considerations that support this possibility. First, stepparents' parenting roles are complex and less defined than biological parenting roles (Craig & Johnson, 2011; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Consequently, stepparents may have to negotiate their position within the family unit without the help of well-established cultural scripts. Second, stepparenting lacks the default legitimacy that is conveyed through biological relationships, perhaps making supportive relationships outside the marital

dyad more difficult to establish (Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1999; Nielsen, 1999). Even family relationships may be inconsistent or unreliable as sources of support for stepparents. For example, unlike biological parents, many stepparents report that their relationships with their (step)children are not reliably positive and that they feel that their (step)children hold them in low regard (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011, 2012). Thus, stepparents not only face unique challenges, but may have to do so with a smaller support network, leading them to rely more on their partners to meet their socioemotional needs than biological parents do. Despite these considerations, and a relatively large body of literature on the role of marital dyadic adjustment in biological parents' mental health outcomes, little research has assessed how marital dyadic adjustment influences psychological adjustment in binuclear families.

Sociocultural and dyadic factors ultimately influence well-being through psychological processes at the level of the individual, which shape the ways in which people perceive and respond to their broader context. Thus, stepparents' expectations and values about gender, family, and parenting may shape their experience of stepparenting and their ability to identify and take advantage of other sources of support, including from their spouses. Traditional family norms emphasize a gendered division of labor in families, reflecting perceived differences in aptitude (such as women being more suited to parenting and men more suited to financially providing for the family). Despite that women are almost as likely to work outside of the home as men (United States Department of Labor Statistics, 2009), traditional family values continue to shape family roles; women do, in fact, take on the majority of parenting and domestic tasks (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010) and men have been found to place a high value on being the primary wage-earners (Townsend, 2002).

While gender roles such as these are ubiquitous and shape the dynamics of many families, they may also be constraining and produce unrealistic expectations in the face of the realities of raising children and running a household. Among other functions, gender roles guide behavior and serve as a standard against which individuals evaluate themselves. Falling short of these expectations may be stressful (Higgins, 1987; Higgins, Bond, Klein, & Strauman, 1986). To the extent that parents with traditional gender views hold themselves to a set of narrow and high expectations about their role as parents, they may feel frustrated and disappointed when these standards are not met relative to parents who have more flexible or realistic expectations.

Indeed, several studies support this possibility in relationships more generally. Rigid adherence to gender roles can lead to poorer romantic relationship quality (Ickes, 1993), while more egalitarian views about gender and family promote greater marital and individual well-being (Helms, Walls, Crouter, & McHale, 2010; Knudson-Martin, 2013). Likewise, a recent study on motherhood and stress suggested that "intense" motherhood, characterized in part by the belief that mothers have a more important parenting role than fathers, is associated with higher levels of stress (Rizzo, Schiffrin, & Liss, 2012). More generally, when high expectations about the enjoyment and ease of parenting do not match its realities, parenting is more difficult and parents experience poorer mental health outcomes (Harwood, McLean, & Durkin, 2007).

While all parents might encounter situations in which their lived reality deviates from the traditional family values they may hold, stepparents may feel that they fall short more frequently and to a greater degree due to the nontraditional nature of their parenting role. Stepparents are seen as less legitimate parents and, perhaps especially in the case of stepmothers, as threatening to the primary relationship with the same-gendered biological parent (Nielsen, 1999; Shapiro & Stewart, 2012; Sweeney, 2010). Research on other marginalized groups, such as lesbian women, suggests that members of these groups who hold traditional views relevant to their identities (such as, in the case of lesbian women,

heteronormative social views) experience more psychological distress than those who do not endorse these views (Szymanski, 2005). Thus, for stepparents, occupying a nontraditional parenting role while simultaneously placing a high value on traditional family roles may result in increased parenting stress.

This study aims to examine the ways in which three processes—social roles (i.e., gender and parenting role), marital quality, and expectations about gender and family—predict parenting stress for biological mothers and fathers, stepmothers, and stepfathers. In doing so, this study adopts a systems perspective to observe (a) the ways in which individual, dyadic, and social processes interact to produce, or buffer against, parenting stress among stepparents and (b) differences in the role of basic individual and family processes in parenting experiences between stepfamilies and biological families. Specifically, it was predicted that while all parents would benefit from high quality marital relationships, this association would be particularly pronounced for stepparents as a result of their more vulnerable parenting role. Similarly, I predicted that stepparents with traditional gender views, which contradict the nontraditional parenting role they occupy, would report more parenting stress than those who held more flexible views. I was interested in exploring the ways in which gender views and dyadic adjustment might intersect with one another to determine parenting stress levels and, in particular, whether stepparents with high quality marriages and nontraditional gender views might be uniquely protected from the stress associated with stepparenting. Finally, I was also interested in whether parenting role and gender might intersect or compound such that stepmothers—who occupy a doubly marginalized role—might report more parenting stress than stepfathers and biological parents.

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

All participants ($N = 310$) were recruited from internet groups and email listservs relevant to parenting. Most participants were recruited from community-based listservs and groups aimed at organizing in person get-togethers for parents and families, providing information about local events and resources, and offering parenting advice. Stepparents and biological parents were recruited using the same methods and all participants received an email inviting them to participate in a survey on parenting and well-being. In order to be included in the study, participants had to identify themselves as (a) in a cohabitating partnership; (b) parenting at least one child between the ages of 3 and 18; (c) as heterosexual (because gay and lesbian parents may face additional challenges not captured in this study); (d) not having a partner who had already participated in the study; and (e) provide identifying information indicating that they currently live in the United States. Attention-checks were included in the survey materials and duplicate IP addresses were excluded. Participants provided their informed consent and were compensated monetarily (\$7 gift card) for their time. The resulting sample included 186 biological parents (131 female) and 124 stepparents (83 female) who did not differ in age or racial composition (see Table 1 for sample demographics).

Both groups were in their mid-thirties, predominantly female (approximately 70%) and European American (approximately 90%). Nearly all of the participants (91%) were in a legally recognized marriage or civil union. Both groups also reported family incomes consistent with middle or upper middle socioeconomic status; approximately 1/3 of both samples reported a household income at or above \$100,000. The groups also did not differ on the number of children in their families; the mean for both groups was around 2–3 children. However, stepparents' children were significantly older than biological parents' children $t(293) = -9.31, p < .001$, a finding that is consistent with other studies comparing

TABLE 1
Demographic Information

Variable	Biological parents		Stepparents	
	Female (<i>N</i> = 131)	Male (<i>N</i> = 55)	Female (<i>N</i> = 83)	Male (<i>N</i> = 41)
Age	34.15 (5.92)	38.86 (5.88)	35.19 (8.0)	39.90 (8.33)
Percent European American (%)	90.6	92.0	89.2	89.7
Number of children	2.49 (1.08)	2.09 (0.93)	2.46 (1.48)	2.68 (1.58)
Average age of children ^a	5.83 (3.27)	5.30 (3.32)	9.79 (4.69)	11.41 (4.86)
Annual household income (%)				
<\$40,000	12.5	3.6	11.0	17.5
\$40,000–60,000	24.2	14.5	9.8	15.0
\$60,000–80,000	27.3	12.7	14.6	27.5
\$80,000–100,000	10.9	20	17.1	10.0
>\$100,000	25	49.1	37.8	30
Parenting stress ^{a,b}	39.68 (9.02)	39.04 (9.19)	53.86 (15.40)	47.21 (15.58)
Gender views	19.41 (8.42)	17.24 (7.46)	18.39 (7.95)	20.66 (6.73)
Dyadic adjustment	52.51 (9.37)	51.66 (8.15)	52.46 (8.47)	51.38 (11.39)
Years stepparenting			4.30 (3.48)	6.49 (4.54)
Stepparents with biological children (%)			37.3	65.9

Note. ^aDenotes a variable on which stepparents and biological parents significantly differ on *t*-tests.

^bMeans controlling for all covariates.

biological and stepfamilies (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). Stepparents also reported whether they had biological children, in addition to their stepchildren (46.8% did), and how long they had been a stepparent ($M = 5.12$ years, $SD = 4.0$).

Measures

All measures demonstrated satisfactory reliability. Ratings on all scales were summed to create scale scores. Intercorrelations between variables of interests are presented in Table 2.

Marital Dyadic Adjustment

Participants reported on the quality of their marriages using a subset of 14 items selected from the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976). These items assessed the frequency of positive interactions (e.g., laugh together) between partners and the participant's sense of the unity, happiness, and future potential of the relationship ($\alpha = .91$). Excluded items, which assessed the similarity of spouses' beliefs about domestic tasks (e.g., chores and finances) and values (e.g., religious matters), were dropped because they were not germane to research questions and therefore added unnecessary length to the

TABLE 2
Intercorrelation Matrix

	Gender views	Dyadic adjustment
Parenting stress	0.08	-0.30**
Gender views	–	0.02

Note. ** $p \leq .01$.

survey. Scale scores ranged from 20 to 67, with higher scores reflecting higher marital quality ($M = 52.19$, $SD = 9.21$).

Gender Views

Participants rated their agreement to a series of seven statements ($\alpha = .79$) reflecting traditional beliefs about gender and family roles (e.g., “Women make better parents than men do”; “Men should be the providers of the household”). Items were developed on a sample of women as a part of a study on feminist identity development (Zucker, 1998). Items are rated on a seven-point scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*) with higher scores reflecting more traditional views. Summed scores ranged from 7 to 44 ($M = 18.92$, $SD = 7.96$).

Parenting Stress

Participants completed The Parental Stress Scale (Berry & Jones, 1995), which consists of 18 questions measuring the level of stress a participant feels as a parent (e.g., “It is difficult for me to balance different responsibilities because of my (step)children”). Items are scored on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*; $\alpha = .86$). Stepparents were instructed to consider only their stepchildren while responding. Higher scores reflect higher levels of parenting stress. Norming data identified a mean of 37.1 ($SD = 8.1$; Berry & Jones, 1995). Scores in the current sample ranged from 18 to 85 with a mean of 44.27 ($SD = 13.28$).

RESULTS

Preliminary analyses indicated that parents’ race, age, marital status, and income were unrelated to the variables of interest. Stepfathers were more likely to have biological children $\chi^2(1, N = 124) = 8.96$, $p < .01$, though this variable was not significant when included as a covariate in the larger model $F < 1$, nor did it affect the statistical significance of other variables. While the average age of children in the household was associated with parenting stress in a bivariate correlation $r(285) = 0.24$, $p < .001$, it was also not significant when included as a covariate in the larger model $F < 1$, nor did it affect the statistical significance of other variables. Thus, in the interest of parsimony, these covariates were excluded from the model reported below.

Analyses were conducted using a Parenting Role (categorical) \times Dyadic Adjustment (continuous) \times Gender Views (continuous) GLM. Following Aiken and West (1991), all continuous variables were centered and all main effects and higher order interactions were entered into the model. Missing data were determined to meet criteria for MAR and therefore excluded listwise. The final model is summarized in Table 3.

Replicating other studies, stepparents reported greater parenting stress than biological parents. There was also a significant main effect of women reporting more parenting stress than men. These main effects were qualified by a two-way interaction between gender and parenting role. Contrast analyses (Rosenthal, Rosnow, & Rubin, 2000) revealed that stepmothers reported higher parenting stress ($M = 53.86$, $SD = 15.40$) than any other group, including stepfathers (all F s > 15 , all p s $< .001$, all $\eta^2_p > .05$). Stepfathers did, however, report more parenting stress ($M = 47.21$, $SD = 15.58$) than both biological mothers $F(268) = 10.27$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2_p = .04$ and biological fathers $F(268) = 10.37$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .04$. Biological mothers ($M = 39.68$, $SD = 9.02$) and fathers ($M = 39.04$, $SD = 9.19$) did not differ in their level of parenting stress $F(1, 268) < 1$.

Returning to the larger model, increased dyadic adjustment and more egalitarian views about gender were associated with reduced parenting stress as two main effects. However,

TABLE 3
General Linear Model Predicting Parenting Stress

Variable	F	η^2_p
Gender	11.21***	.04
Parenting role	63.47***	.19
Gender views	7.37**	.03
Dyadic adjustment	36.27***	.12
Gender × Dyadic adjustment	0.51	.00
Gender × Gender views	1.81	.01
Parenting role × Dyadic adjustment	8.85**	.03
Parenting role × Gender views	5.57*	.02
Parenting role × Gender	6.87**	.25
Dyadic adjustment × Gender views	0.65	.00
Gender × Parenting role × Dyadic adjustment	2.11	.01
Gender × Parenting role × Gender views	2.44	.01
Gender × Dyadic adjustment × Gender views	0.01	.00
Parenting role × Dyadic adjustment × Gender views	4.60*	.02
Parenting role × Gender × Dyadic adjustment × Gender views	0.67	.00

Note. * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$.

both of these main effects were qualified by two-way interactions with parenting role, reflecting that the contributions of these variables were stronger for stepparents than for biological parents.

These findings were also qualified by a significant three-way interaction among parenting role, dyadic adjustment, and gender views (see Figure 1). This interaction reflects that for biological parents, dyadic adjustment alone predicted their experience of parenting stress, $F(1, 268) = 4.90, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .02$ for the simple main effect. For biological parents, gender views, and the simple interaction between gender views and dyadic adjustment were not significant, $F_s < 1$.

In contrast, the relationships between dyadic adjustment, beliefs about gender, and parenting stress were more complicated for stepparents, as reflected by a simple two-way interaction between dyadic adjustment and gender views, $F(1, 268) = 3.89, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .01$, for the simple interaction. This simple two-way interaction suggested that while higher dyadic adjustment predicted reduced parenting stress for all stepparents, these

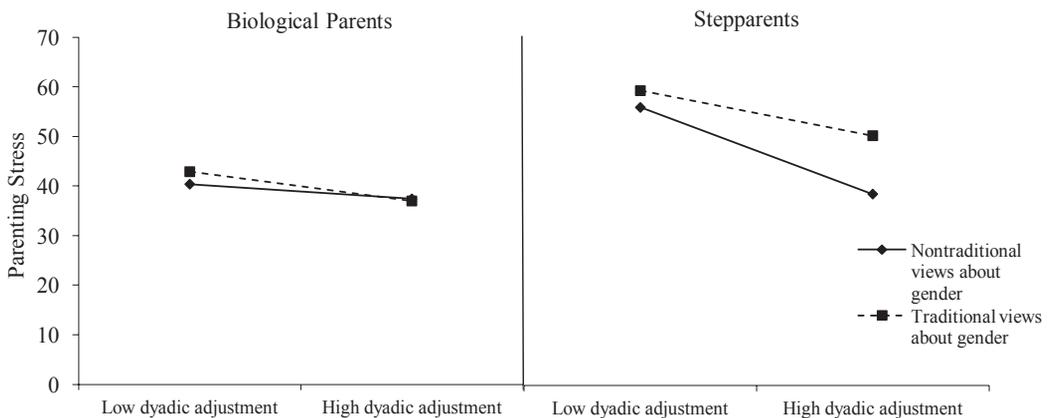


FIGURE 1. Three-way Interaction among Parenting Role, Dyadic Adjustment, and Gender Views.

effects were especially pronounced among stepparents with less traditional views about gender (one standard deviation below the mean) than among stepparents with more traditional gender roles attitudes (one standard deviation above the mean), $F(1, 268) = 44.87$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .14$ and $F(1, 268) = 10.48$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2_p = .04$ respectively for the simple main effects (see Figure 1).

Illustrating this effect, a spotlight analysis (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003) comparing biological and stepparents with equivalent levels of dyadic adjustment and views about gender revealed that stepparents and biological parents who expressed nontraditional gender views and high marital quality (each at one standard deviation above the mean) did not differ in reported parenting stress, $F(268) < 1$. However, in all other combinations of gender views and dyadic adjustment, stepparents reported significantly greater parenting stress than biological parents (all F s > 17 , all p s $< .001$, all $\eta^2_p > .06$). Thus, stepparents with poor marital quality and/or traditional gender views account for the observed differences in parenting stress between stepparents and biological parents.

To summarize, the three-way interaction among parenting role, dyadic adjustment, and gender views identified that (a) among biological parents, dyadic adjustment alone was associated with parenting stress and this effect was relatively small; (b) the effect of dyadic adjustment was larger for stepparents; (c) nontraditional views about gender were associated with lower reported parenting stress among stepparents, but not among biological parents; and (d) stepparents with high dyadic adjustment *and* nontraditional views about gender reported the same levels of parenting stress as biological parents.

DISCUSSION

Taken together, the findings of this study are consistent with systemic perspectives of parenting, which conceptualize stress as the result of factors across multiple levels—socio-cultural, dyadic, and individual—interacting to shape stepparents' parenting experiences. Specifically, as hypothesized and replicating other research, stepparents experienced more parenting stress than biological parents. Extending this finding, this study compared biological fathers and mothers to stepmothers and stepfathers and found that stepmothers reported particularly high levels of parenting stress. Replicating other research, all parents with high marital quality experienced lower levels of parenting stress but, adding to this general finding and as hypothesized, this was particularly pronounced for stepparents. In addition, stepparents with traditional gender views reported higher levels of parenting stress. There was a three-way interaction between parenting role, gender views, and marital dyadic adjustment such that, for stepparents, both nontraditional gender views and high marital quality jointly predicted the greatest protection from parenting stress. In fact, stepparents with both high marital adjustment and nontraditional gender views were indistinguishable in terms of parenting stress from biological parents, while stepparents who were low on one or both of these dimensions experienced substantially more parenting stress. This pattern of results suggests that nontraditional gender views and high marital quality may both be necessary (and neither sufficient) to buffer against the stress associated with stepparenting.

At the level of the individual, parents with traditional views about gender and family may set a specific standard for themselves that is difficult to fulfill when they adopt an inherently nontraditional parenting role, such as stepparenting. By adopting a nontraditional parenting role, stepparents may create a gap between their ideal of a traditional, gender-normative family and their lived reality as a nontraditional parent; the wider the gap between the ideal and the actual self, the more stress they may experience (Higgins, 1987). Parents may be particularly vulnerable to the negative psychological consequences

of falling short of their ideals as the cultural expectations associated with parenthood are particularly high (Oyserman, Bybee, Mowbray, & Kahng, 2006). Alternatively, or additionally, having flexible beliefs about gender and family may be protective against the stress related to stepparenting by reflecting and/or enhancing a stepparent's ability to accept, negotiate, and acknowledge the value in their role as a non-traditional parent.

This flexibility predicted the lowest levels of parenting stress when combined with a highly functional marital relationship. Such relationships, which predicted lower parenting stress for all parents but especially so among stepparents, may provide social and logistical supports that ease both the demands of parenting as well as their psychological consequences. Social support may be less accessible for stepparents outside of their marriages than it is for biological parents, whose more legitimate parenting role allows them greater social and familial acceptance and validation (Shapiro & Stewart, 2012; Sweeney, 2010). Further, highly functional marriages may be less demanding on stepparents' emotional and logistical resources, freeing up more energy to focus on stepparenting relationships and greater emotional resiliency in the case of complicated or difficult parenting situations.

That these two processes—nontraditional gender views and high marital quality—were associated with the lowest levels of parenting stress in combination suggests that they may be mutually reinforcing and complementary to each other. Because stepparents who hold traditional gender views may have narrower (and in fact unobtainable) standards about the roles that they and their spouse can occupy, they may be less equipped to take advantage of the full range of logistical and emotional supports that their spouses could offer. In other words, traditionally minded stepparents may elicit and accept only the social resources that are consistent with a gendered division of labor. By holding flexible and dynamic views about family roles, stepparents with nontraditional gender views may be able to exploit supportive marital relationships creatively, and in response to their changing needs, as a way to better mitigate the stress associated with stepparenting.

In addition to exploring the individual expectations and dyadic processes associated with parenting stress, this study directly compared experiences of parenting stress across individuals with different social roles, namely stepmothers, stepfathers, and biological mothers and fathers and, to my knowledge, is the first to do so. These comparisons indicated that although stepfathers also experience high levels of parenting stress relative to biological parents, stepmothering may be particularly challenging. Stepmothers reported more parenting stress than biological mothers, consistent with previous research findings (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011), as well as stepfathers and biological fathers. In contrast to binuclear families, biological mothers and fathers did not differ in their reports of parenting stress, indicating, as other studies have (Baker, 1994; Deater-Deckard, 1998; Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996; Putnick et al., 2010), that in a biological family gender may not be a strong predictor of parenting stress.

The different role that gender may play in biological and step-families may reflect social norms that support biological motherhood, but make stepmotherhood a particularly stressful role. Cultural tropes around parenthood prescribe that mothers, above fathers and other caregivers, have a unique ability to love and care for their children (Collins, 2011; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Trebilcot, 1983). As a result, arrangements that require co-mothering between a biological and stepmother may be perceived as threatening and ultimately marginalize the stepmother (Nielsen, 1999). These norms, while perhaps present in some form for stepfathers, may be less powerful, given the different and often less-demanding expectations surrounding fatherhood and stepfatherhood (Andrews, Luckey, Bolden, Whiting-Fickling, & Lind, 2004; Collins, Newman, & McKenry, 1995) and the

more negative stereotypes surrounding stepmotherhood (Whiting, Smith, Bamett, & Graftsky, 2007).

These findings regarding gender and stepparenting also suggest that being both female and a stepparent is a uniquely challenging role that results in a unique experience of parenting stress. The parenting stress stepmothers experience is at the very least quantitatively, and perhaps also qualitatively, distinct from that experienced by biological mothers and stepfathers, who hold one, but not both, of the marginalized identities that stepmothers occupy. Future research should also investigate the etiology of stress in binuclear families and among stepmothers in particular. Research that examines family relationships in greater depth, experiences of stigma or exclusion, and external sources of social support and validation may build on the work presented here to more fully capture the factors that make stepparenting uniquely stressful.

Taken together, the findings of this study suggest that stepparenting stress is likely multifactorial and predicted by processes at multiple systemic levels, which interact with one another to result in unique stressors for stepparents in general and stepmothers in particular. These findings have several implications for clinical practice and future research. First, they suggest that while clinical approaches employed to address highly stressful parenting situations in traditional families might be relevant for stepfamilies, clinicians should tailor their approach to stepparents' unique role (Browning, 2013; Higginbotham, Skogrand, & Torres, 2010) and approach stepfamily functioning as a systemic process that is shaped by societal, relational, and individual processes. This approach may include addressing issues like gender, marital problems, and, more tentatively, traditional or rigid views about gender roles that may impact stepfamilies in a different or more direct way than traditional families. By helping stepparents and their partners to improve the overall quality of their marriage and cultivate a flexible and accepting attitude toward themselves and their families, clinicians might help stepparents to better manage the stresses of adopting a stepparenting role. Further, clinicians might pay special attention to the challenges and stress faced by stepmothers, who may represent a particularly vulnerable and underserved clinical population (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). Future research should attempt to translate findings from this and other research on stepfamily functioning into intervention strategies that address the unique stressors and challenges encountered in these family systems.

Despite the potential importance of these findings, this study has several limitations worth noting. First, this convenience sample was collected online using single-source reports and, as a result, may be subject to sampling bias and reflect only one partner's assessment of marital quality. In a similar vein, parenting groups and listservs may contain an overrepresentation of parents and stepparents with low social support or who are otherwise more vulnerable to parenting stress; the findings presented here may not be generalizable to parents and stepparents not involved in such groups. The findings presented here are also not generalizable to a population that is more racially or economically diverse. It is possible that family characteristics, such as social class, race, or additional variables that were not measured in this study may confound parenting role or gender and limit the interpretability of results. Commensurate caution should be taken in generalizing these findings to a more diverse population. Second, we were able to recruit fewer men than women in both the biological parent and stepparent samples. This may have limited our ability to detect gender differences or capture the diversity of men's experiences of fatherhood and stepfatherhood. Finally, there are a number of other family dynamics and individual variables that may contribute to parenting stress, such as availability of external supports, children's coping and beliefs, role clarity or ambiguity, and political and social climate. While these were beyond the scope of this study, they are important areas for future investigation.

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