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Abstract

Separations exert a detrimental impact on different areas of life in both adults and children. Having already experienced family instability, stepfamily members are at risk of experiencing even multiple family separations across the life course. To better understand stepfamily (in)stability in Europe, we study stability risks and facilitators between stepfamilies in Germany. We pursue Cherlin's perspective of stepfamilies' destabilizing lack of institutionalization. Specifically, we assess the impact of social control in terms of social and legislative conditions, (step)parents' social roles in terms of gender roles, and customs and conventions of family life in terms of union status.

We apply event history analysis to a sample of 2,166 stepfamilies, 543 of which end up separated, from the German National Educational Panel Study (NEPS). For example, we find that social and legislative liberalization might destabilize stepfamilies if it eases leaving unhappy relationships, and might stabilize stepfamilies if it alleviates stepfamilies' financial or caregiving burdens through de-familiarization. In contrast to stepfather families, stepmother families' stability appears to profit from stepmothers' and biological fathers' investment in stepfamily relationships to make up for noncomplying with gendered social roles. Overall, stepfamily stability appears to benefit from individual as well as societal pursuits of re-institutionalization.

Keywords: Stepfamily Instability, Germany, Legislation, Union Status, Type of Stepfamily

1 Introduction

In Germany, every third marriage ends in a divorce (Federal Statistical Office, 2020). Separations, however, have been found to impact the life of both affected adults and children (Teachman and Tedrow, 2008), involving tense socio-economic situations (Neuberger, Schutter and Preisner, 2019), risky health behaviors (Rattay *et al.,* 2018), impaired well-being (Neppl *et al.,* 2015; Lopoo and DeLeire, 2014), and more conflictual and unstable future relationships, even for the next generation (Arránz Becker, 2008; Feldhaus and Heintz-Martin, 2015; Amato, 2010). In light of the baneful impact of any separation, multiple separations in a life course might have a cumulative effect on individuals (Fomby and Cherlin 2007). As stepfamilies account for 15 % of families in East and 10 % in West Germany (Kreyenfeld and Martin, 2011; Heintz-Martin, Entleitner-Phleps and Langmeyer, 2015), a sizeable social group is at risk of experiencing multiple family separations.

Indeed, a large body of literature has theorized and found stepfamilies to be even less stable than nuclear families. The respective empirical results are unanimous in North America (for the U.S .e.g.: van Eeden-Moorefield *et al.,* 2007; Jensen, Shafer and Holmes, 2017; for Canada e.g.: Martin, Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2011; Saint-Jacques *et al.,* 2011) though the few results in Europe are mixed (higher separation risks in a country comparison: Henz and Thomson, 2005; similar divorce risks in Sweden: Erlangsen and Andersson, 2001; higher stability of second unions in France: Beaujouan, 2016). Stepfamilies' higher instability has been ascribed to their higher complexity (Martin, Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2011), because of which they face more stressful processes of family life (Falke and Larson, 2007) and "must solve problems unknown to other types of family" (Cherlin, 1978: 636). Taking a more comprehensive perspective, Cherlin (1978) published a seminal theoretical framework on stepfamily instability, arguing that stepfamilies are at a high risk to separate because of the "incomplete institutionalization" of remarriages (Cherlin, 1978: 646). Specifically, he suggests that stepfamilies forfeit stability because they have no institutionalized behavior that is shaped by means of social control, social roles of (step)parents, and customs and conventions of family life. While the concept has been supported by comparisons between nuclear families and stepfamilies (see Guzzo, 2018; Sweeney, 2010), we aim to go one step further. In order to understand risks to and facilitators of stepfamily stability, we examine the concept's contribution to understanding stability differences between stepfamilies. In doing so, we ask: To what extent do means of social control, social roles of (step)parents, and customs and conventions of family life

contribute to stepfamilies' higher or lower (in)stability? To follow up on these question, we adapt Cherlin's three arguments into applicable concepts, i.e., social and legislative conditions, gender roles, and union status, and examine their impact on stepfamily (in)stability.

We draw upon the case of Germany. Research on European stepfamilies is generally rare and Germany is a particularly interesting case study. Despite the country's high separation rates and its historical and regional heterogeneity, which affects both family formation and dissolution behavior, German stepfamilies (in)stability has not been studied yet. We consider stepfamilies in terms of household structure. This concept is valid for Germany, because children of separated parents live predominantly with one parent (mostly the mother) and visit their other parent on weekends; shared residence is not as prevalent in Germany as it is in other European countries[1] (Langmeyer *et al.,* 2022). We define stepfamilies as households of two adults and one or more minor(s) of which at least one is a biological child to one adult, but not to the other. More complex types of stepfamilies, i.e. blended stepfamilies (with common child(ren)) and crossover stepfamilies (with stepchildren to each parent), are accounted for, but not in the focus of this paper. We rely on individual data and proxy-reports for partners from the German National Educational Panel Study (NEPS) (Blossfeld and Roßbach, 2019), applying event history analysis to 2,166 stepfamilies that were formed between 1963 and 2020.

2 Theoretical background and hypotheses

Means of social control: the role of social and legislative conditions

In his seminal work, Cherlin argues that law and legislation is "a means of social control", and as such acts as "an indicator of accepted patterns of behavior" (Cherlin, 1978: 644). This notion easily applies to a wider array of structural and cultural framework conditions that equally take effect as "means of social control" (aside from legislations, e.g., institutions, economics, norms, values, attitudes) (cf. Johnson-Hanks, 2011; Sewell, 2011), which is why we broaden our perspective accordingly. Cherlin claims that the majority of social guidelines implicitly address first unions, specifically marriages, leaving stepfamilies without clear means of social control. He draws on legislative examples, which only hesitantly balance financial obligations, and competing claims of

[1] Though this is subject to boundary ambiguity as discussed by Stewart (2007): stepfamilies often display a non-permanent household structure as a result of different custody arrangements and two individuals' union orders.

current and ex-families (ibid.). Against this backdrop, we aim to understand how changes in social framework conditions, and legislations in particular, influence stepfamily (in)stability.

For the case of Germany, to understand such social change, one has to account for both its binational history up until 1990[2], and their long-term development. West Germany, on the one hand, underwent important changes in family demography, similar to most Western societies (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Surkyn and Lesthaeghe, 2004; van de Kaa, 1987). Among other developments, women's improved position in society, their access to higher education and the labor market "challeng[ed] traditional marriage norms and improve[ed] their economic situation" (Kaplan and Herbst, 2015: 951). This lead to higher separation and divorce rates and a rising importance of cohabiting unions instead of marital ones. By means of legislation, these liberalizations were accompanied by several changes of marriage and divorce laws. Up until July 1977, separations were subject to the principle of blame, which allowed for divorces only after marital misconduct that also reduced the 'guilty' partner's maintenance claims. It was succeeded by the principle of breakdown that allowed for divorces upon spouses' irretrievable differences and one year of separation (González and Viitanen, 2009).

Meanwhile, in the East German Democratic Republic (GDR), norms and legislation encouraged and facilitated mothers' full-time employment. Couples were financially incentivized to marry, but divorces could be pursued quite liberally as early as 1965. Nonetheless, the motherhood norm was strong in East Germany: children typically lived with their mothers upon separation. As most women were financially independent, however, they could choose a new union free from economic necessities.

Upon reunification in 1990, East Germany joined West German legislation and its principle of breakdown. In 2008, the law was superseded by the maintenance law, which limited ex-partners' financial maintenance in order to reduce especially stepfamilies' disproportionate financial burden. Aside from legislative unity, especially the East German society has experienced tremendous social changes following reunification. Even though economic and institutional differences have since

[2] For four decades up until 1990, Germany has experienced two separate states with very different political and economic systems: the socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the East and social democratic Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in the West.

diminished (Bayaz-Ozturk *et al.,* 2018), normative dissimilarities, e.g., regarding motherhood, employment, and marriage norms, remain considerable (Arránz Becker, Lois and Nauck, 2010).

These historical social changes reflect a continuous social and legislative liberalization that leads to a decrease in the stability of all families. Indeed, every third marriage in Germany today ends in a divorce (Federal Statistical Office, 2020). As more first unions separate, the number of stepfamilies increases. Today, the share of stepfamilies amounts to 15 % of families in East Germany and 10 % in West Germany (Kreyenfeld and Martin, 2011; Heintz-Martin, Entleitner-Phleps and Langmeyer, 2015). Following Cherlin's argument, however, this increase of normalcy, acceptance, and legislative integration of stepfamilies would help to complete their institutionalization, leading to an increase of stability. Thus, for stepfamilies, two competing mechanisms might be in effect. As these are perhaps impossible to disentangle, we expect the all-encompassing, destabilizing impact of liberalization to outweigh the stepfamily-specific, stabilizing influence of institutionalization. Thus, in terms of social change, we expect a decrease of stepfamily stability across cohorts for both German regions (Hypothesis 1a). More specifically, in terms of legislative change, we expect stepfamily instability to be higher during times of more liberal divorce legislations such as in the GDR and in more recent times than during more restricting legislations (Hypothesis 1b).

Social roles of (step)parents: comparing stepmother and stepfather families

Cherlin argues that, in stepfamilies, parental roles lack adequate terms and thus institutional support, acceptance and legitimate patterns of activity. Indeed, roles such as "dad" and "stepmother" struggle for acknowledgement and meaning, with the allocation of affection and attention, and with rights and duties in between current and previous families, biological children and stepchildren, resident stepparents and nonresident biological parents (Petren *et al.,* 2019). Stepfamilies start with dimensions of complexity that are a challenge to their dynamics and stability. This is especially true alongside the dimension of gender: a parent's and partner's behavior is shaped by overall gender norms, their previous gender role experiences as parents and partners, plus their current role experiences in both their current and previous family. Thus, it is particularly interesting how gender-specific types of stepfamily, i.e., if it is a stepmother or a stepfather family, contribute to stepfamily (in)stability.

Most stepfamilies consist of a biological mother, her children and a stepfather, because children tend to stay with their mother after separation (Bernardi, Mortelmans and Larenza, 2018). This is a

result of gendered parental roles: mothers' high involvement and emotional closeness is often the basis of an ongoing, close mother-child-relationship beyond parents' separation. Mothers, especially from East Germany, are more likely to form a stepfamily after only having experienced single parenthood (Kreyenfeld *et al.,* 2017). Against this backdrop, stepmother and stepfather families cope with different challenges regarding their social roles as stepparents towards their resident stepchildren, as stepparents towards their nonresident biological children, and as current partners. Previous research suggests that the type of stepfamily is crucial for the quality of these relationships and thus their stability (Heintz-Martin, 2013; Saint-Jacques *et al.,* 2011; Martin, Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2011).

Regarding the social roles of stepparents towards their stepchildren, findings for stepfathers are somewhat mixed (Pryor, 2008; Hofferth *et al.,* 2007): Generally, fathering roles are relatively narrow and thus fairly consistent: across family types, they focus on providing financial support and protection rather than on emotional involvement with children (Coleman, Troilo and Jamison, 2008; Andrews *et al.,* 2004). (Step)mothering, in turn, is more controversial. It faces clichés like the 'wicked stepmother' as the biological bond of mother and child is still normatively sacrosanct: mothering is based on the expectation of being a 'good mother' (Bravermann, 1989) who nurtures and sacrifices her well-being for the good of the children (Coleman, Troilo and Jamison, 2008). In line with these mothering roles – and contrary to the cliché –, stepmothers are often more willing to invest in the relationships with their stepchildren (Ihinger-Tallman and Pasley, 1997; Pasley and Ihinger-Tallman, 1987). Thus, these gendered social roles of stepparents point to a higher dedication and hence a higher stability in stepmother families than in stepfather families.

With regard to the social roles of stepparents towards their nonresident biological children, we know that the demands of maintaining ties to children outside the household is particularly prevalent among stepfathers: they are more likely to have children from a previous union (Carlson and Furstenberg, 2006; Robertson, 2008; Guzzo and Furstenberg, 2007). Thus, stepfathers are more likely to juggle between their social roles of being a stepfather and being a biological father across households. Stepmothers, in turn, are often childless and do not face these struggles. This, too, hints at a higher stability of stepmother families.

Regarding the social roles as partners in a stepfamily, stepfather families have been found to have a better family climate (Heintz-Martin, Entleitner-Phleps and Langmeyer, 2015) and to benefit from

the biological mothers' role as 'glue that holds stepfamilies together' (Ganong and Coleman, 2017; Smith, 2008). At the same time, the biological fathers in stepmother families can be assumed to put more effort in relationships in general: staying close to their children, despite opposing gendered social roles, might be a blueprint for their investment in the relationship with their new partner (Desrosiers, Le Bourdais and Laplante, 1995). Thus, there appears to be no clear influence of social roles on partners' relationship stability in stepfamilies.

Our theorized role of gendered (step)parent-(step)child relationships is supported by empirical research from North America that finds stepfather families to be less stable than stepmother families (Desrosiers, Le Bourdais and Laplante, 1995; Martin, Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2011; Teachman, 1986). In sum, for our analyses for Germany, we assume that stepfather families are more likely to separate than stepmother families (Hypothesis 2).

Customs and conventions of family life: the impact of cohabitation and marriage

In Cherlin's framework (Cherlin, 1978), customs and conventions of family life are less clear for stepfamilies. While he exemplifies this with directive or disciplinary relationships between parents and stepchildren, we extend the perspective to the nature of relationships between partners. Specifically, we argue that stepfamilies lack clear conventions (or even norms) of institutionalizing a union, i.e. living in cohabitation or marriage. Thus, we aim to understand the role union status plays in stepfamily (in)stability.

Generally, cohabiting unions have gained ground at the expense of married ones in both the U.S. (Lamidi, Manning and Brown, 2019) and in Europe (Liefbroer and Dourleijn, 2006). In Germany, cohabiting families are more prevalent in East than in West Germany: 60 % of all children in East Germany were born to unmarried couples compared to 28 % in Western Germany (Kreyenfeld *et al.,* 2017; Schnor, 2014). It is well-documented that cohabiting first unions are less stable (Brown, Stykes and Manning, 2016; Andersson, 2003; Schnor, 2014) and of shorter duration (Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004) than married ones. After five years, 20 % of cohabiting women in Germany are separated compared to 10 % of married ones (Schnor, 2014). This may be a result of married unions' (legal) constraints to breaking up, which increases both the self-selection of more committed couples into marriage and the commitment between spouses once married (Marcil-Gratton, Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2000). However, as Lamidi, Manning and Brown (2019) and

Liefbroer and Dourleijn (2006) suggest, cohabiting couples' stability might benefit from the acceptance of cohabitation in society.

For stepfamilies, the conventional pathway of having a child not before living in cohabitation or better even wedlock is per se invalid. As at least one partner has previous, often negative, union experiences, these might affect the attitudes towards cohabitation as a union of trust and marriage as a union of legal obligation. Furthermore, not (yet) divorced previous marriages might diminish couples' choices. Thus, cohabitation as opposed to marriage might be a viable and attractive option for stepfamilies. Still, as stepfamilies generally lack institutionalization, cohabitation as a non-institutionalized union status would add another – destabilizing – dimension to that lack (Manning and Lamb, 2003; Guzzo, 2018). Thus, we expect stepfamilies living in cohabitation to be less stable than married stepfamilies (Hypothesis 3).

3 Data and methods

We use individual data from the adult cohort of the German National Educational Panel Study (NEPS-Netzwerk, 2021; Blossfeld and Roßbach, 2019). NEPS observes a sample of 17,139 adults from the cohorts 1944 until 1986 that is representative of the German adult population; partner information are collected by proxy. The dataset fruitfully combines retrospective life-course data, collected at each respondents' first interview wave, and prospective panel data, collected in up to twelve waves between 2007 and 2020[3]. To minimize recollection biases inherent in retrospective surveys, a data-revision module facilitates the correction of inconsistent information and overlapping episodes across life domains as well as incomplete or missing calendar dates directly during the interviews (Ruland *et al.,* 2016). As a result, NEPS data offers complete and consistent information on respondents' entire histories of, e.g., partnerships, household compositions, and childbirths. Thus, our data is never left-censored and we can utilize every single respondent's information up to his or her most recent interview.

[3] The sample consists of individual respondents that participated in the survey at least once as part of the initial (2007), refreshment (2009, 2011) or enhancement samples (2009). The participation proportions range between 27.4 and 30.4 % for the first interviews and between 73.0 and 89.5 % for follow-up interviews. The relevant information for this paper was collected using computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI) and computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI).

Our event history analyses focus on stepfamilies, based on respondents' statements on with whom they share their household. The observation starts when stepfamilies move into a shared household, i.e. when they are at risk of separating. In order to identify stepfamilies, we draw upon two different respondent perspectives: (1) The respondent reports moving in with a new partner; the respondent had been living with (one) biological child(ren) both before and after moving. (2) The respondent reports moving in with a partner and (one) child(ren); the offspring is neither biological to nor adopted or fostered by the respondent[4], and is thus presumed to be the partner's child(ren). If individuals live in several subsequent stepfamilies, we only regard their first union. For crossover stepfamilies, we only consider the respondent's perspective. Unfortunately, the data does not allow us to identify nonresidential stepchildren.

We observe stepfamilies over the course of the adult relationships in the presence of (step)children. The focal event, a separation, takes place if a couple with (step)children dissolves the shared household before the data is right-censored. We right-censor the data as a result of following three events: (1) The youngest (step)child moves out, after which point the (step)parents continue sharing a household. (2) The youngest (step)child reaches a move-out age of 21.5 years[5], after which the (step)parents remain in the same household. (3) The respondent cannot be observed further due to their drop-out or the temporary end of the survey.

We find missing values on less than 4 % of cases and delete them in line with (Allison, 2002). Following these specifications, we observe 2,166 stepfamilies of which 534 ended up separated.

Event history analysis is a powerful tool to understand the hazard rate of an event to occur, as well as its risks to and facilitators. We estimate the stepfamilies' monthly hazard to separate in piecewise exponential models. They allow us to estimate hazard rates r to experience an event k, which vary between L within-constant intervals I_l that divide the observation time t. These intervals partition the baseline hazard; we suppress the constant term and instead estimate hazard rates for each interval. The constant coefficient in the model is $\bar{\alpha}_l^{(k)}$. Furthermore, the model encompasses a

[4] Unfortunately, we do not have information on the timing of adoptions and potential biological ties to the other parent. Thus, we might underestimate the number of stepfamilies in cases in which former stepparents are recorded as adoptive parents.

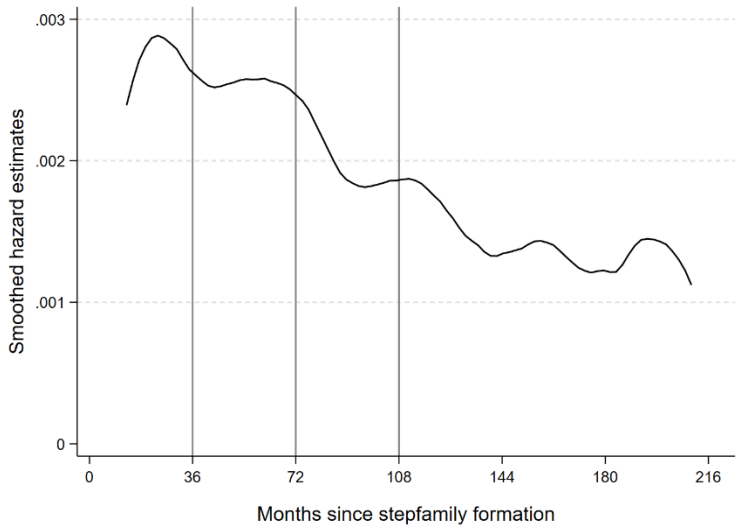
[5] The median age of a child's move-out is around 21.5 years according to Konietzka and Tatjes (2018).

vector of time-constant and time-dependent covariates $A^{(k)}$, and the associated vector of coefficients $\alpha^{(k)}$ (Blossfeld, Rohwer and Golsch, 2009)

$$r_k(t) = \exp(\bar{\alpha}_l^{(k)} + A^{(k)}\alpha^{(k)}) \qquad if \quad \tau_l < t \leq \tau_{l+1}$$

As time intervals for the period-specific models, we section the most eventful first nine years after stepfamily formation into three equal periods of three years each. The remaining time thereafter is represented by one single open-ended interval. Figure 1 presents the intervals (gray lines) relative to the smoothed[6] hazard estimates: They span separations within the first three years (1 to 36 months) after stepfamily formation, between three and six years (37 to 72 months), between six and nine years (73 to 108 months), and after nine years (more than 108 months) after stepfamily formation.

Fig. 1: Smoothed hazard estimates of stepfamilies' separation risk



Note: NEPS SC6 12.1.0. Vertical gray lines show the intervals used in the piecewise exponential models.

We present our results from multivariate models. In the order of our theoretical discussion and deduction of hypotheses, we insert the central covariates step by step and, at last, control for other variables' impact. Based on the full model, we present graphs that plot the central covariates' predicted hazard rates while keeping all other covariates and controls constant.

[6] The bandwidth of the kernel smooth is 10. We show smoothed instead of monthly estimates to reflect the underlying nature of the progression of hazard estimates.

Central covariates

In the very center of our analyses is the question of how aspects of social control, parental roles, and conventions of family life influence the stability of stepfamilies. We operationalize these factors using both parents' birth cohort and legislative changes in East and West Germany, the type of stepfamily, and its union status.

To frame historical social changes with its cultural, economic, and social framework conditions, we account for stepfamilies' living region: West Germany, East Germany, Berlin and abroad. The birth cohort affiliation is reflective of intergenerational social changes; we consider the characteristics of both the biological parent and the stepparent to represent the dyadic impact on family processes[7]. Specifically, we group birth cohorts from before 1945, 1945 to 1954, 1955 to 1964, 1965 to 1974, and 1975 and after.

To account for legislative changes, we estimate the impact of the divorce laws that were relevant at a particular period. For East Germany, the variable describes the GDR's marriage and divorce law as of 1965 until the German reunification in 1990. For West Germany exclusively, it accounts for the principle of blame until June 1977, and the principle of breakdown in the subsequent years. As of 1990, the variable depicts all-German laws: the principle of breakdown until December 2007 and the maintenance law thereafter. For stepfamilies who live in pre-reunification Berlin or abroad, we cannot ascribe any of the above law periods; instead, we group them in a miscellaneous category 'other'.

Furthermore, we compare stepfamilies by their type, i.e. stepfather or stepmother family: a stepfather family reflects a household of a mother with at least one biological child and a male partner who is not the child's parent; a stepmother family reflects the reverse type with a biological father and a female partner. To account for crossover or blended stepfamilies, we control for constellations with biological children from each parent separately or common offspring (see control variables below).

At last, we assess the impact of union status, i.e., if a stepfamily's parents are married or unmarried but cohabiting.

[7] The affiliations of the two partners correlate by a Pearson's r of 0.68. The VIF-values of the variables in a joint model are, however, below 2.5. Accordingly, multicollinearity is not an issue in our analyses.

Control variables

We control for an array of factors that we assume to be of relevance for the separation risks. First, we control for biological and stepparents' educational level. For a long time, findings on the (female) educational attainment and their risk to divorce consistently showed that higher educated women were more likely to separate (Blossfeld *et al.,* 1995; Levinger, 1976). The literature has explained this with their relatively liberal attitudes, their readiness to leave unhappy marriages, and their higher economic independence. When divorce became an increasingly accepted tool to leave unhappy relationships, the risk to separate also increased for lower educated women (Graaf and Kalmijn, 2006; Bernardi and Martinez-Pastor, 2011), possibly because of a higher economic and psycho-emotional marital strain. Hence, the control variable separates respondents with no or lower secondary qualification, middle secondary qualification, upper secondary qualification (each without or with vocational training), and those with tertiary qualification.

Second, we enter a series of variables that represent family composition, particularly with regard to children. We account for the age of the youngest child in groups (up to 5 years, 6 to 10 years, 11 to 14 years, and 15 years or more). With age, children may get more reluctant to accept a stepparent (Robertson, 2008; Pasley and Moorefield, 2004); this may add destabilizing conflicts to the stepfamily. We include the number of children living in the household at any given time (one, two, and three or more children), as each child adds complexity to the stepfamily and may increase the risk to separate. Furthermore, we control for the complexity of stepfamilies: one variable reflects blended constellations with common children; another controls for crossover constellations in which each parent has both a biological child and is stepparent to his or her partner's child. Blended stepfamilies with common child(ren) tend to be more stable, though it is typically difficult to disentangle if more stable stepfamilies have common children or if the shared biological bonds of common children tie families together (Juby, Marcil-Gratton and Le Bourdais, 2001). Stepfamilies with crossover biological and stepparenting relationships reflect particularly complex and thus potentially conflictual and unstable stepfamilies, though their number is very low.

In Table 1 we describe the central and control variables and their distribution among biological parents, stepparents and stepfamilies as a whole. For time-constant variables, we present the observed cases; for time-varying variables, we present the observed months.

Table 1: Description of the sample's central covariates and controls

	Biological parent		Stepparent		Stepfamily	
	n	%	n	%	n/obs	%
Main variables						
Living region (time-varying)						
West Germany					151,317	59.4
East Germany					84,814	33.3
Berlin					10,020	3.9
abroad					8,620	3.4
Birth cohort (time-constant)						
before 1945	36	1.7	118	5.5		
1945-54	442	20.4	387	17.9		
1955-64	823	38.0	815	37.6		
1965-74	610	28.2	585	27.0		
1975 and after	255	11.8	261	12.1		
Reform (time-varying)						
West German principle of blame (-1977)					5,214	2.1
principle of breakdown (1977/1990-2007)					149,724	58.8
GDR marriage law (-1990)					34,506	13.5
maintenance law (2008-)					48,171	18.9
other					17,156	6.7
Type of stepfamily (time-constant)						
stepfather family					1,618	74.7
stepmother family					548	25.3
Union status (time-varying)						
married					184,829	72.6
unmarried cohabiting					69,942	27.5

continued on the next page

Control variables

Level of education (time-varying)						
no or lower secondary qual'n	69,842	27.4	74,583	29.3		
middle secondary qual'n	116,450	45.7	98,339	38.6		
upper secondary qual'n	27,791	10.9	25,812	10.1		
tertiary qual'n	40,688	16.0	56,037	22.0		
Number of children in household (time-varying)						
1					77,992	30.6
2					113,247	44.5
3 +					63,532	24.9
Age of youngest child in household (time-varying)						
up to 5 yrs					104,442	41.0
6 to 10 yrs					66,421	26.1
11 to 14 yrs					42,146	16.5
15 yrs +					41,762	16.4
Blended family with common child(ren) (time-varying)						
no					141,299	55.5
yes					113,472	44.5
Crossover stepfamily with biological child(ren) of each parent (time-varying)						
no					250,994	98.5
yes					3,777	1.5
N (cases)	*2,166*	*100*	*2,166*	*100*	*2,166*	*100*
N (observation months)	*254,771*	*100*	*254,771*	*100*	*254,771*	*100*

Note: NEPS SC6 12.1.0.

4 Results

In Table 2, we present the hazard ratios of our multivariate piecewise exponential models. Model m0 reflects the baseline of monthly hazard rates for stepfamily separations, keeping the estimates in Figure 1 constant within the predefined intervals. The monthly hazard to separate is relatively high in the first six years after stepfamily formation, but aside from smaller variations, the separation hazards decline over time.

In Hypothesis 1a, we expected an increasing risk of stepfamily separation for younger cohorts compared to older ones in both East and West Germany. In m1, we insert both living region and cohort affiliations into the model. Indeed, we find significant effects for the birth cohort affiliation of biological parents, not stepparents, throughout all models. Presumably, biological parents bear more responsibility over the household's children and thus dominate bargaining and decision-making processes that affect family stability. These effects are not moderated by the living region (interaction analyses not shown). In line with our hypothesis, the results suggest that birth cohorts born after 1965 in both German regions live in significantly less stable stepfamilies than the observed birth cohorts before. This remains true across all models, with only minor variations in the effect strengths. In fact, as of birth cohorts 1955 to 1964, biological parents' cohort groups each have a higher tendency to separate than the one before. Thus, starting with the mid-1950 cohorts, the results suggest a continuous, possibly ongoing, trend towards an increasing instability across cohorts. Furthermore, younger birth cohorts are not only more likely to separate, but also separate more quickly (results not shown).

In another vein of historical social changes, in Hypothesis 1b, we expected stepfamily instability to be higher at times of more liberal divorce legislations, especially in the GDR and in more recent times. To follow up on that issue, we estimate the impact of legislations, i.e. divorce laws, in m2. Indeed, the most recent maintenance law shows a higher stepfamily instability. Furthermore, the somewhat surprising m1-effect that East German stepfamilies are less likely to separate than those in West Germany is explained by legislations. It appears to build upon a high instability in West Germany during the recent maintenance law, in line with our Hypothesis 1b. Further analyses also suggest a, by tendency, higher stepfamily stability in pre-reunification East Germany. Interestingly, however, these effects are associated with the union status as shown in m4: the respective marriage behavior appears to account for the higher stability in the GDR and the lower stability in current

West Germany. For pre-reunification East Germany, this suggests that legislations that incentivize marriages while liberalizing divorces may diminish the confining character of marriage and may thus lead to a higher number of married stepfamilies. They, in turn, benefited from the immensely stabilizing effect (see below, cf. Hypothesis 3). In current West Germany, in contrast, the maintenance law appears to have considerably reduced stepfamilies' tendency to marry – potentially because it means waiving entitlements to alimony from the former partner while obligating the new spouse. The lower tendency to marry reflects in higher separation hazards. Interestingly, however, post-reunification East Germany retains a stabilizing effect after controlling for union status. Apparently, the stabilizing pre-reunification values of the GDR, then driven by legislation, have advanced into post-unification East Germany. This might be a result of a cultural spillover as well as of a persistently greater independence of the often full-time employed East German mothers, which allows for a partner choice that is less influenced by financial considerations. In sum, the results suggest a complex mélange of historical social changes in which the role of legislation is hard to disentangle. Thus, we cannot find unanimous support for our Hypothesis 1b.

Furthermore, in Hypothesis 2, we assumed that stepfather families are less stable than stepmother families. The results as of m3 confirm this expectation: stepmother families are less likely to separate than the more common stepfather families. Upon controlling for union status in m4, the effect loses some of its size and significance. This suggests that part of stepmother families' greater stability is based on their higher tendency to marry. Presumably, this, too, reflects stepmothers' and biological fathers' greater willingness to invest in the quality and dependability of familial bonds. Furthermore, stepfathers' greater likelihood of having nonresidential children might pose a hindrance to institutionalizing the new family through marriage as it might (further) hierarchize the father-child relationships.

With regard to our Hypothesis 3, married stepfamilies' greater stability as opposed to unmarried cohabiting stepfamilies, we find strong support in the corresponding effect as of m4. Furthermore, inserting union status into the model levels the baseline hazard, suggesting that stepfamilies' hazard to separate does not per se decrease over time. Instead, this reflects a matter of self-selection: the more committed and hence stable stepfamilies are, the sooner they marry, while highly unstable stepfamilies remain unmarried in the long(er) run. This also corresponds with our Hypothesis 3, which assumed a higher stability among married stepfamilies.

The control variables in m5 only partly point in the expectable directions (cf. page 13). Like for cohort affiliation, it is the biological parent's educational level that affects stability, not of the stepparent's. Therein, we find a fishhook-shaped effect that corresponds with what we know from the literature: a medium separation hazard among the lower education, a low hazard among those with middle secondary qualification, and an increasing hazard with higher education. Contrary to our assumptions, we do not find (de)stabilizing effects of family composition in the full model: neither the age of the youngest child, nor the number of children living in the household yields relevant results. Similarly, the disentangled impact of complex stepfamilies does not follow our assumptions either: family blending does not appear to stabilize stepfamilies, while crossover stepfamilies does not suggest destabilization. While the latter may be a result of a very small cell size, the former loses its significance when controlling for union status. In light of stepfamilies' initial lack of institutionalization, it appears that stepfamilies aim to follow the customs and conventions of family life more closely: they blend their family with a common child only when they are willing to seal it by marriage, too.

Table 2: Piecewise exponential models for stepfamily separations

	m0 hr (se)	m1 hr (se)	m2 hr (se)	m3 hr (se)	m4 hr (se)	m5 hr (se)
Analysis time at stepfamily separation						
0 to 36 months	0.0027 (.00) **	0.0022 (.00) **	0.0021 (.00) **	0.0023 (.00) **	0.0008 (.00) **	0.0006 (.00) **
36 to 72 months	0.0025 (.00) **	0.0021 (.00) **	0.0020 (.00) **	0.0022 (.00) **	0.0011 (.00) **	0.0009 (.00) **
72 to 108 months	0.0018 (.00) **	0.0016 (.00) **	0.0015 (.00) **	0.0016 (.00) **	0.0010 (.00) **	0.0009 (.00) **
more than 108 months	0.0014 (.00) **	0.0013 (.00) **	0.0012 (.00) **	0.0013 (.00) **	0.0011 (.00) **	0.0009 (.00) **
Living region						
West GER		ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.
East GER		0.77 (.08) **	0.84 (.10)	0.84 (.10)	0.79 (.09) *	0.87 (.11)
Berlin		1.06 (.23)	0.54 (.31)	0.52 (.30)	0.44 (.26)	0.45 (.26)
abroad		0.66 (.17)	0.32 (.22) +	0.32 (.22) +	0.38 (.26)	0.36 (.25)
Birth cohort (stepparent)						
before 1945		0.91 (.22)	0.97 (.24)	0.82 (.21)	0.84 (.21)	0.79 (.20)
1945-54		0.99 (.15)	1.04 (.15)	0.97 (.14)	0.96 (.14)	0.93 (.14)
1955-64		ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.
1965-74		1.07 (.13)	1.04 (.13)	1.1 (.14)	1.09 (.14)	1.11 (.14)
1975 and after		0.91 (.20)	0.87 (.19)	0.97 (.21)	1.03 (.21)	1.07 (.22)
Birth cohort (biological parent)						
before 1945		0.86 (.37)	0.94 (.41)	1.09 (.48)	1.05 (.46)	0.99 (.44)
1945-54		0.99 (.15)	1.05 (.16)	1.16 (.18)	1.16 (.18)	1.15 (.18)
1955-64		ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.
1965-74		1.63 (.20) **	1.51 (.19) **	1.42 (.18) **	1.48 (.19) **	1.55 (.20) **
1975 and after		2.92 (.61) **	2.45 (.53) **	2.16 (.47) **	2.13 (.46) **	2.23 (.50) **

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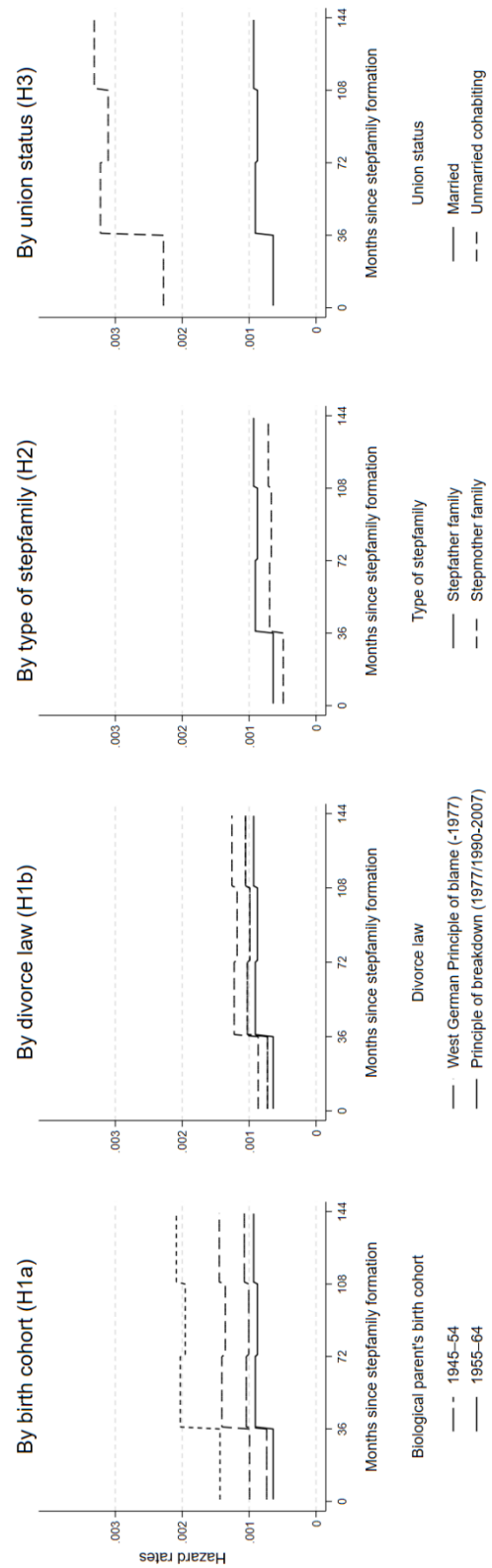
Divorce law					
West German principle of blame (-1977)	0.66 (.26)	0.66 (.26)	1.1 (.44)	1.13 (.47)	
principle of breakdown (1977/1990-2007)	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	
GDR divorce law (-1990)	0.82 (.16)	0.83 (.17)	1.26 (.25)	1.35 (.28)	
maintenance law (2008-)	1.40 (.16) **	1.39 (.16) **	1.17 (.14)	1.13 (.14)	
other	2.31 (1.45)	2.34 (1.47)	2.82 (1.77) +	2.93 (1.84) +	
Type of stepfamily					
stepmother (ref.: stepfather)		0.69 (.08) **	0.81 (.10) +	0.76 (.09) *	
Union status					
unmarried cohabiting (ref.: married)			3.76 (.39) **	3.55 (.38) **	
Level of education (stepparent)					
no or lower secondary qual'n				1.20 (.14)	
middle secondary qual'n				ref.	
upper secondary qual'n				1.06 (.15)	
tertiary qual'n				0.90 (.12)	
Level of education (biological parent)					
no or lower secondary qual'n				1.24 (.15) +	
middle secondary qual'n				ref.	
upper secondary qual'n				1.51 (.21) **	
tertiary qual'n				1.62 (.22) **	
Age of youngest child					
up to 5 yrs				ref.	
6 - 10 yrs				1.00 (.12)	
11 - 14 yrs				1.08 (.16)	
15 yrs +				1.02 (.17)	
Number of children in household					
1				1.06 (.12)	
2				ref.	
3 +				0.94 (.11)	
Blended family with common child(ren)				0.80 (.12)	
Crossover stepfamily with biological child(ren) of each parent				1.24 (.38)	
N (observation months)	*254,771*	*254,771*	*254,771*	*254,771*	*254,771*	*254,771*
N (cases)	*2,166*	*2,166*	*2,166*	*2,166*	*2,166*	*2,166*

Note: NEPS SC6 12.1.0. + p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01.

Figure 2 puts a different emphasis on the previously reported results. For the central risks and facilitators that remain stable throughout our models – the cohort affiliation of biological parents, the type of stepfamily and the union status – it illustrates the predicted hazard rates, ceteris paribus (m5), in absolute terms. Thereby, it facilitates a comparison across covariates. The figure shows that the impact of union status is indeed substantial: unmarried stepfamilies are more than thrice as likely to split up. The effect is, in fact, the strongest among the covariates in focus and cannot be compensated for by any other factor. Ranging second in relevance is birth cohort affiliation: while cohorts 1965 to 1974 are 55 % more likely to separate than the cohorts before, the cohorts of 1975 and after are more than twice as likely to separate. Compared to these effects, the size of stepfamily type and divorce law is very small: Stepfather families are significantly, but only 31 % more likely to separate as the less typical stepmother families (hr: 1/0.76). During the GDR divorce law, in turn, stepfamilies were 35 % more likely to separate than during the principle of breakdown, from which the other legislative periods do not differ significantly, however. To help understand the effects in relation to nuclear families, we apply a brief comparative perspective in die Appendix.

Fig. 2: Hazard rates of stepfamily instability by central covariates



Note: NEPS SC6 12.1.0. Results based on piecewise exponential models in Table 2. Other central covariates and controls constant (at): biological parent's and stepparent's cohort affiliation (1955-1964), type of stepfamily (stepfather family), union status (married), area of living (West Germany), divorce law (principle of breakdown), biological parent's and stepparent's educational attainment (intermediate secondary qualification), age of youngest child (up to 5 yrs), number of children (2), blended family (no), crossover stepfamily (no).

5 Conclusion

Stepfamilies are part of family diversity today – and yet, they have repeatedly been argued to struggle with an „incomplete institutionalization“ (Guzzo, 2018; Cherlin, 1978). In this paper, we study to what extent different dimensions of this deficiency pose a risk to stepfamily stability. Using NEPS data, we aim to understand the impact of means of social control in terms of intergenerational social and legislative conditions, social roles of (step)parents in terms of gendered parental roles, and customs and conventions of family life in terms of union status.

Our analyses and findings are, as usual, subject to limitations. Particularly, the NEPS dataset is not an ideal database to study dyadic or household processes. It relies on respondents' proxy information, which unfortunately do not cover some relevant aspects like partners' employment status. Furthermore, stepfamily relationships are merely a residual category to other parent-child-relationships. As a result, the analyses rely on some premises and assumptions. An ideal dataset would furthermore provide information on psycho-social and relational family characteristics like family climate, well-being indicators, gender roles, and quality of relationships. Despite these shortcomings, the NEPS data offers a unique perspective on family processes, both across entire life courses, as well as ample cohorts and societal groups. As a result, our findings are nonetheless most informative.

We find that stepfamily stability decreases considerably across biological parents' cohorts. We ascribe this development to result from social change towards more liberal attitudes, more financial, social and psycho-emotional independence, and also more conflictual reconciliation arrangements, all of which may destabilize relationships. The role of legislative change, in turn, is minor and less clear: On the one hand, more liberal marriage and divorce laws might facilitate instability when they ease leaving a marriage, but strain re-entering into another one with having to assume financial, legal, and possibly even caregiving obligations. On the other hand, liberal laws might support union stability when they help to normalize re-marriage, while alleviating individuals of financial or caregiving burdens. Thus, in terms of social conditions as „indicator of accepted patterns of behavior“ (Cherlin, 1978: 644) we indeed find indication that the family-destabilizing trend towards liberalization might be somewhat contended by legislations that help to complete stepfamily institutionalization. Perhaps, legislations are more likely to achieve the latter if they aim for de-familiarization, i.e. legislative and welfare support for individuals to uncouple their material

and physical well-being from family members. If forming a stepfamily is not an issue of security but of fondness, it might be a more satisfactory and thus stable endeavor.

Regarding stepfamily type, we find that stepmother families are slightly more stable than the more common stepfather families, in part because of their higher tendency to marry. As parental roles in stepfamilies per se lack accepted patterns of activity (Cherlin, 1978), stepmothers as well as biological fathers appear to invest in stepfamily relationships to make up for their noncompliance with gendered social roles, which typically bind children to their biological mothers (Martin, Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2011; Desrosiers, Le Bourdais and Laplante, 1995). Thereby, they seem to aim for completion of their institutionalization. For stepfathers who often have nonresident biological children, in contrast, pursuing this aim would be much more difficult for they juggle social roles in several families.

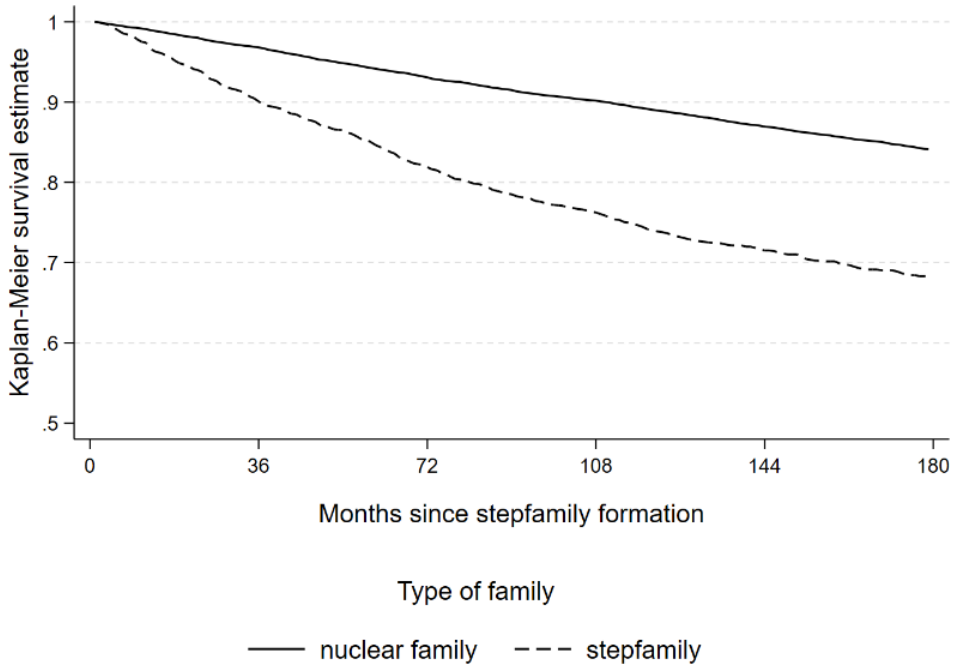
Most strikingly, however, we find an immensely stabilizing impact of marriage, which proves relevant in concurrence with several other factors, for example legislations, stepfamily type, and family blending with a common child. Marriages go along with clear expectations for family functioning and parental roles (Manning and Lamb, 2003) – they represent an institutionalized union status that appears to make up for stepfamilies‘ general lack of institutionalization.

Overall, our findings suggest that stepfamily stability, struggling with an incomplete institutionalization, benefit from individual as well as societal pursuits of re-institutionalization. Stepfamilies face manifold challenges of balancing and negotiating expectations, experiences, and needs of previous and current, adult and minor family members. In light of these challenges, notions of institutionalization can provide orientation, reduce complexity, give certainty – and thus increase stability.

Appendix

To allow for a brief comparative digression, we prepared the NEPS data on nuclear families equivalent to the data processing of stepfamilies, starting with the event when a common child enters an adult union. We can regard 10,799 nuclear families, 1,946 of which end up separated. Appendix 1 shows that nuclear families are considerably more stable than stepfamilies. Appendix 2 shows that the risks factors of family separation are similar but more pronounced in terms of cohort affiliation, union status, living region and divorce law. For nuclear families, the biological parents' alternate in how their characteristics influence separations risks: it is the cohort affiliation of mothers and the level of education of fathers that is more influential. For stepfamilies, in contrast, the biological parent's characteristics dominate. Furthermore, the family composition in terms of the youngest child's age and the number of children yield a significant impact, quite in contrast to stepfamilies. A more in depth analytical comparison, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

Appendix 1: Family survival function by type of family



Appendix 2: Piecewise exponential models for separations of nuclear families and stepfamilies

	nuclear family hr (se)		stepfamily hr (se)	
Analysis time at stepfamily separation				
0 to 36 months	0.0004 (.00)	**	0.0006 (.00)	**
36 to 72 months	0.0007 (.00)	**	0.0009 (.00)	**
72 to 108 months	0.0006 (.00)	**	0.0009 (.00)	**
more than 108 months	0.0007 (.00)	**	0.0009 (.00)	**
Living region				
West GER	ref.		ref.	
East GER	0.81 (.06)	**	0.87 (.11)	
Berlin	1.20 (.25)		0.45 (.26)	
abroad	0.79 (.22)		0.36 (.25)	
Birth cohort	*(father)*		*(stepparent)*	
before 1945	1.10 (.15)		0.79 (.20)	
1945-54	0.97 (.08)		0.93 (.14)	
1955-64	ref.		ref.	
1965-74	1.08 (.08)		1.11 (.14)	
1975 and after	1.42 (.20)	*	1.07 (.22)	
Birth cohort	*(mother)*		*(biological parent)*	
before 1945	0.70 (.18)		0.99 (.44)	
1945-54	0.82 (.07)	*	1.15 (.18)	
1955-64	ref.		ref.	
1965-74	1.29 (.10)	**	1.55 (.20)	**
1975 and after	1.28 (.17)	+	2.23 (.50)	**
Divorce law				
West German principle of blame (-1977)	1.10 (.21)		1.13 (.47)	
principle of breakdown (1977/1990-2007)	ref.		ref.	
GDR divorce law (-1990)	1.61 (.20)	**	1.35 (.28)	
maintenance law (2008-)	0.90 (.06)		1.13 (.14)	
other	1.06 (.25)		2.93 (1.84)	+
Type of stepfamily				
stepmother (ref.: stepfather)			0.76 (.09)	*

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Union status				
unmarried cohabiting (ref.: married)	5.38 (.36)	**	3.55 (.38)	**
Level of education	*(father)*		*(stepparent)*	
no or lower secondary qual'n	1.15 (.07)	*	1.20 (.14)	
middle secondary qual'n	ref.		ref.	
upper secondary qual'n	0.96 (.07)		1.06 (.15)	
tertiary qual'n	0.81 (.05)	**	0.90 (.12)	
Level of education	*(mother)*		*(biological parent)*	
no or lower secondary qual'n	0.91 (.06)		1.24 (.15)	+
middle secondary qual'n	ref.		ref.	
upper secondary qual'n	1.03 (.07)		1.51 (.21)	**
tertiary qual'n	0.85 (.06)	*	1.62 (.22)	**
Age of youngest child				
up to 5 yrs	ref.		ref.	
6 - 10 yrs	1.30 (.11)	**	1.00 (.12)	
11 - 14 yrs	1.32 (.13)	**	1.08 (.16)	
15 yrs +	1.22 (.13)	+	1.02 (.17)	
Number of children in household				
1	1.25 (.07)	**	1.06 (.12)	
2	ref.		ref.	
3 +	1.02 (.07)		0.94 (.11)	
Blended family with common child(ren)			0.80 (.12)	
Crossover stepfamily with biological child(ren) of each parent			1.24 (.38)	
N (observation months)	*2,183,919*		*254,771*	
N (cases)	*10,799*		*2,166*	

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