

Between Fathers: The Role of Multiple Liminality in Children's Attribution of Fatherhood in Stepfamilies

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With shifting family structures, an increasing number of children experience more than two parental figures throughout their upbringing. While existing research has predominantly focused on dyadic relationships between children and either their parents or stepparents, this study, through the lens of liminality, examines how children raised in stepfamilies perceive the fathering role of both biological fathers and stepfathers. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 adult children and mothers living in stepfamilies. All interviews were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, which identified overarching patterns. Subsequently, interpretative phenomenological analysis was applied to the children's interviews to capture the individualized processes through which they attribute the fathering role. While children's accounts revealed their meaning-making, mothers' interviews provided contextual insight. We identified three patterns in how children attributed fatherhood: 1) the biological father as the only father, 2) the stepfather as a father figure, and 3) no one is the father. Across all patterns, children experienced both father figures as liminal, both "both fathers and non-fathers" and "neither fathers nor non-fathers", while still attributing the fathering role to one of them or none. It depended on factors such as the child's age and agency, emotional ties, maternal gatekeeping, and the father's investment.

Key words: stepfamilies, liminality, fatherhood, child perspective

Introduction

The high prevalence of repartnering in recent decades increases the likelihood that children will experience changes in the adults residing with them in the same household (Carlson, 2018). Simultaneously, children often main-

tain ongoing contact with their non-residential parent. In most cases, mothers continue to serve as the primary residential parent (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Grall, 2006). However, recent trends indicate a significant shift in non-residential fathers' involvement and caregiving roles (Sandberg, 2023). In Slovakia, where this study is situated, 69% of children

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reside after divorce or separation primarily with their mothers, 10% with their fathers, and 12% experience joint physical custody (Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, 2025). Simultaneously, repartnering is common with 48 950 stepfamilies (7.33% of all families with children) living in Slovakia, the vast majority being composed of a mother, her biological children, and a stepfather (Ivančíková et al., 2023). Consequently, an increasing number of children experience two (or more) father figures that influence their lives (White & Gilbreth, 2001).

Research has often addressed stepfamily dynamics and non-residential father involvement separately. Studies on non-residential fathers have emphasized the importance of ongoing, reciprocal contact (King & Sobolewski, 2006), with the quality of father-child interactions proving more important than their frequency (Amato et al., 2009; Whiteside & Becker, 2000). The extent of paternal involvement is also shaped by the quality of the co-parenting between former partners (Spaan et al., 2022) and maternal gatekeeping that may either facilitate or restrict access (Austin et al., 2013; Walper et al., 2020). Furthermore, existing research suggests that the formation of a stepfamily is associated with a decline in non-residential father's contact (Seltzer, 1991; Stephens, 1996).

Reciprocally, some studies indicate that the degree of biological father's involvement can influence the stepfather's willingness and ability to develop a meaningful relationship with the child (Blyaert et al., 2016; Guzzo, 2018; Petren et al., 2018), his capacity to assume a fathering role (Gold, 2019), and his acceptance as a paternal substitute by children (Kalmijn, 2021). Several additional factors have been identified as facilitating the stepfather's involvement, including supportive maternal gatekeeping (Ganong et al., 2020) and the child's age at the time of the stepfam-

ily formation, since younger children tend to accept the stepfather's fathering more easily (Ganong et al., 2011).

The simultaneous presence of the two father figures in a child's life may create conflicts between a loyalty bond to the biological father and liking the stepfather (Jensen & Shafer, 2013; Papernow, 2018). As a result, children often experience ambivalence toward both paternal figures and can perceive them as both a parent and nonparent with various contradictions that animate relationships (Schrodt, 2015). Within the stepparent-child relationship, three key tensions often arise: emotional distance versus closeness, the desire for authority to reside solely with the biological parent versus shared authority with the stepparent, and openness versus closeness in communication (Baxter et al., 2004). Children may also experience similar ambivalence in their relationships with non-residential fathers. While they often wish for greater involvement and more open communication, they may simultaneously avoid them due to discomfort, loyalty concerns towards the residential parent and a stepparent, or the perception that the father is disconnected from their daily life (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006).

As apparent, children's relationships with both a biological father and a stepfather are mutually influential. Nevertheless, children in this context can attribute the fathering role to one of the figures, or these relationships coexist complementary: positively, when both fathers are engaged and a supportive biological father facilitates the child-stepfather bond, or negatively, when both are disengaged, leading to relational neglect (Hornstra et al., 2020; Klaus et al., 2012). However, research that simultaneously examines concurrent relationships with a biological father and a stepfather remains scarce and limited to quantitative studies offering narrow insight into the nuanced ways children balance, sub-

stitute, or complement fathering in these dual paternal relationships.

The present qualitative study seeks to address this gap by exploring how children attribute the fathering role to their biological father and a stepfather. The study is grounded in the theoretical framework of liminality that suggests that individuals can exist in a state that is simultaneously “both-and” and “neither-nor” (Kofoed & Stenner, 2017). Liminality was originally introduced by ethnologist van Gennep (1960/1909) and later generalized to any individuals or groups undergoing transitions, positioning them as being ‘betwixt and between’ (Turner, 1964) of established structures, norms, or patterns (Stenner & Moreno, 2013). While liminal states hold potential for transformation, they are also marked by uncertainty, instability, and the need for redefinition (Popper, 2016). In the stepfamily context, the redefinition of familial roles, expectations, and relationships, particularly for both the non-residential biological father and the residential stepfather is required. Each of these father figures occupies an inherently ambiguous parental position. As such, children may come to perceive them simultaneously as both father and non-father, and as neither father nor non-father—an experience of the complex, liminal space.

Methods

Research Design

A qualitative approach was employed in the study, allowing for a more nuanced and backgrounded understanding of the children’s attributions of fathering in stepfamilies. The research was conducted in Slovakia with adult children who were raised in stepfamily settings and with mothers living in this type of family. Although the original research questions were broader in scope, the present study focuses

solely on children’s attribution of fathering. While the children’s interviews served as a primary unit of analysis, the mothers’ perspectives offered useful contextual insight, as they typically serve as gatekeepers in children’s relationships with both non-residential fathers and stepfathers. The data were analyzed using a combination of two complementary qualitative methods: reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022) and elements of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). While RTA was effective in identifying overarching patterns, it was less suited to capturing the deeper, individualized processes. To address this, the analysis incorporated principles from IPA to answer the main research question: *How do children in stepfamilies attribute fathering to both paternal figures – non-residential biological father and a stepfather?*

Participants

The data sample comprised eight adult children and seven mothers with experience of living in stepfamilies. The age of participating “children” ranged from 19 to 30, with a mean of 23 years. The group consisted of 5 females and 3 males, none of which had their own children. The average age of the mothers was 42 (ranging from 35 to 48), and they had 1 to 4 children, most commonly two. The participating mothers and children were not biologically related, as research concerning multiple family members may introduce ethical challenges, including potential breaches of confidentiality and privacy, and influence on the family dynamic. The participants’ names used in the study are pseudonyms.

Data Collection

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling through targeted advertisements on

social media platforms. The main criterion for participation was the experience with a stepfamily. The age range of the adult children (18 to 30 years) was selected to ensure relatively recent memories of childhood while allowing for a degree of retrospective reflection. Mothers were eligible to participate if they had formed a stepfamily before the age of 40, thereby excluding cases in which stepfamilies were established during their children's young adulthood.

All 15 interviews took place over the course of 2022. In qualitative research, especially RTA, meaning is generated through interpretation, and there is no predetermined data-set size; the decision on size is guided by information richness and conceptual sufficiency (Braun & Clarke, 2022) that has been reached by our sample. The interviews were conducted online by the first author and lasted approximately one hour. Consequently, they were transcribed verbatim. Each interview began with a prompt inviting participants to recount the circumstances surrounding the formation of their stepfamily. This narrative approach was followed by a series of predefined basic questions exploring various themes, including adaptation to the new family structure, relationship development with family members, everyday functioning within the household, shared leisure activities, intimacy, trust, overall family atmosphere, and perceptions of stepfamily well-being. Each question was supported by elaborated prompts to encourage in-depth discussion. While the thematic focus of the interviews was similar for both mothers and children, the questions were adapted to each subgroup. For example, mothers were asked how they considered the children's opinions, whereas the children were asked whether they felt their concerns were taken into account. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Institute for Research in Social Communica-

tion of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. The participants received a 20 EUR voucher for their participation.

Data Analysis

The initial phase of the mothers' and children's data analysis followed the six-step process of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2006) covering the whole interview set. Each subgroup was analyzed separately by one of the authors, and subsequently, generated themes were mutually compared, discussed, and merged into themes applicable to the entire dataset. The RTA revealed themes associated with both the biological father and the stepfather – such as trust and intimacy – indicating that children may attribute aspects of fathering to both paternal figures. In response to these findings, both authors undertook a more focused analysis across the themes aimed at understanding *to whom* and *why* individual children attribute fathering, as well as the factors influencing these attributions. To explore the specificities, lived experiences, and meaning-making processes within each child's account, we employed IPA, a person-centered approach that facilitates a rich, contextually grounded understanding of participants' narratives (Smith et al., 2009). This analysis was guided by the theoretical framework of liminality and the possible position of both “both-and” and “neither-nor” of both father figures.

During the analytical process, the authors engaged in self-reflection, considering how their own backgrounds may have shaped their interpretive lenses. Both authors have personal experiences with stepfamily formation, although at different stages of development – one during childhood and the other in late adolescence. These differing temporal points of entry into stepfamily life provided distinct understanding, potentially informing their sensitivity to age-specific attitudes

and experiences related to stepfather relationships. These perspectives were openly discussed throughout the research process, allowing the authors to challenge each other's assumptions, acknowledge subjectivities, and strengthen the credibility of the findings through mutual critical reflection.

Findings

Our analysis identified three core relational patterns in the ways children attributed the role of "father": 1) the biological father as the only father, 2) the stepfather as a father figure, and 3) no one is the father. While these patterns may appear conceptually straightforward, the data revealed meaningful nuances and diverse developmental trajectories in the evolution of child–father relationships.

Biological Father as the Only Father

Some children in our sample ascribed fatherhood exclusively to their biological father. These children often reported strong emotional bonds and maintained regular, meaningful contact with their fathers:

And with my father...I have such a relationship with him that I will tell him anything, I trust him with anything...I am grateful that I can trust him, even if I have a problem...whether it is relationships, friends, school...or just some private problems. (Eva, 19)

Mothers in some cases reinforced this dynamic through gatekeeping behaviors, assuming primary responsibility for parenting within the stepfamily and limiting the involvement of the stepfather:

That was my role... We discussed it afterwards [with a partner], what I did, what the rules are, and he agreed. But it was always me who dealt with the children. It was between me, my son and my daughter. (Ingrid, 48)

Additionally, according to the mothers, stepfathers in these situations seemed to accept this role division, refraining from active parenting and instead providing limited support or interest in the child's daily life:

They communicate, but the upbringing is up to me. He saw that the children were well raised, there was no need. If he needs to tell them something, he does, even if it's unpleasant. But he more or less backs-off. He says that I am the mother, so I should take care of it. He talks to them, about school, he asks questions, he is interested a lot. But when it comes to upbringing, that's more or less up to me. (Jane, 48)

Moreover, the mothers' support for the children's relationship with their biological father seems to be a relevant factor in sustaining this pattern:

But they saw that their father had failed. And it took a while till the trust in their father came back. It was like that, that the father tried to undermine their trust towards me, but I did the opposite, I tried to induce their trust in him. (Ingrid, 48)

Despite the clear pattern of exclusive attribution of fatherhood to the biological father, variations within this category revealed the complex interplay between mother–child, father–child, and stepfather–child relationships as the following cases demonstrate.

Eva – emphasis on biological parenting

Following her parents' divorce, Eva (19) lived with her mother and stepfather. Initially, the relationship with her stepfather was positive (*It was great, we played with him, he brought us things, took us on trips.*). However, a rupture occurred with the birth of her stepfather's biological child, which coincided with Eva's entry into adolescence:

I was, I don't know, from my side it was, maybe it was puberty, I resisted and talked back. But I also felt that his relationship had

changed. Maybe, I think, that as long as he had no biological child, he took us as his kids, but when Mom got pregnant, there was a rupture in our relationship... I noticed as he was about to have his biological child that his attitude was different towards us, as we would be a rank lower.

The escalating tensions within Eva's household eventually led her to move into her father's newly formed stepfamily. However, this transition was short-lived, as new conflicts emerged – this time between Eva and her stepmother. The situation culminated in the stepmother issuing an ultimatum to Eva's father, demanding that either Eva or she leave the household. Although Eva deeply valued her father's choice to prioritize her, she decided to move out and live independently – on the condition that her father would support her financially. She made this decision to avoid being the cause of a disruption to his new family.

Despite these significant ruptures and complex relational shifts, Eva reported maintaining strong and meaningful relationships with both of her biological parents in adulthood:

As I grew up for a while with two parents, then just with mom, later just with dad, I have it so that each of them is my role model, but in different things. Really, mom, it is amazing what she has managed, us, her partner, all together, it was not easy for her either, so maybe, she is such a strong person. And dad, maybe in the area of career, I would say that he is really goal driven, he knows what he wants to achieve, he knows how to get there and what he needs to do. So, both my parents are my role models, but in different ways.

Eva's narrative illustrates a consistent emphasis on biological parenthood, as reflected in her language: she refers to having lived "just with mom" and "just with dad," omitting mention of stepparents despite their presence during her upbringing. Furthermore,

her decision to leave her father's household demonstrates a commitment to her parents' emotional well-being and an implicit recognition of the role stepparents play in their lives, even if not embraced as parental figures themselves.

Hilda – father as a refuge

The theme of the biological father as a refuge in the face of stepfamily conflict also emerged in the narrative of Hilda (26):

I spent a lot of time in my room or with my father. Father did not have his girlfriend yet, so I was quite a lot in his flat. Although it was complicated, he was renovating it, so I couldn't be there 24/7.

Hilda experienced the entrance of her mother's new partner into their household as intrusive and reported never forming a bond with him. She not only acknowledged the paternal role of her biological father exclusively but also described him as her primary role model, outmatching even her mother. In this case, the establishment of her mother's stepfamily appeared to weaken the mother-child bond:

I took it that way, that my home was my safe place, and then it all broke into pieces, and I think, I still do not have it to this day. I have my room, but the house altogether... Our relationships are much better now, but I have lost the attachment I used to have to home.

This account underscores how the restructuring of family life through the formation of a stepfamily can significantly impact children's sense of emotional security and belonging. For both Eva and Hilda, the biological father served not only as the primary father figure but also as a symbol of stability amid the disruptions brought by the stepfamily.

Dustin and Hilda - relationships evolve

While the earlier example emphasizes the role of consistently close relationships in

shaping children's attribution of fatherhood to their biological fathers, the following quote suggests that such attribution may also stem from bonds that develop or strengthen later in life:

It [relationship] has changed gradually, my father has changed. Because when we were little, he was very nervous and unpleasant, but then, when we were older, we spent a lot of time together, at least I did, also with my youngest brother. (Hilda, 24)

The perceived authenticity and emotional depth of the relationship, rather than its constancy across childhood, appear to be influential, even when the father's earlier behavior was met with criticism. For example, Dustin (21) reflected on a moment of disappointment with his father:

I needed help, I might have been at the beginning of high school, I didn't understand some math, and my father, he knows math, so I wanted him to help me. And I had a feeling that he would rather watch TV than help me. This is what I would like to prevent [in his parenthood], a child should be cared for, feel that parents are interested... I couldn't say that my father didn't care at all, but a child should feel that it is 100%.

Despite expressing criticism, Dustin continued to view his biological parents as central figures in his adult life (*when I have some issues, I go to my mother and father*). Conversely, he described his relationship with his stepfather in distant and emotionally neutral terms (*with mum's partner we are, I wouldn't say cold, but casual, nothing special*).

The abovementioned examples underscore the multifaceted nature of children's preferences for biological fatherhood. Several key factors appear to facilitate this pattern: a strong emotional bond between father and child (regardless of whether it was consistent or developed gradually), supportive co-parenting of the mother, and the low engage-

ment of the stepfather. The biological father's position may be reinforced when the stepfather adopts a more peripheral role – either by his own choice or through maternal gatekeeping.

However, the relationship dynamic can increase or reduce a child's liminal experience. In cases of negative relationships with stepfathers, children may seek emotional refuge in their bond with their biological father, particularly during periods of crisis within the residential family. Thus, heightened experiences of relational ambiguity and insecurity within the stepfamily context – which can be understood as intense liminal experiences – may lead children to reassert or strengthen their attachment to the more stable figure of the biological father.

Stepfather as a Father Figure

Our data indicate that the attribution of the father role to a stepfather most commonly occurs when children are very young at the time of stepfamily formation and when the biological father is absent or contacts are limited. The absence of the biological father may arise for various reasons and may follow different temporal trajectories. In some cases, contact with the father was minimal or non-existent. In other cases, disengagement was more gradual, often accompanied by disappointment or unfulfilled expectations, as described by Olina (37), who had a child with a man already in another family:

Maybe when the first son was three and a half years old, some kind of situation arose, but nothing catastrophic, which made me a little angry, that he spent so little time with us, but it was understandable, yet, it's a shame. We were number two... It made me feel hurt. He planned to do more for us, but he was not able to keep his promises. He actually promised that he would visit us more often and

he would take us on a big trip and spend as much time with the little one as possible. But it didn't work out for him. Since then, I kind of cut it off.

Absence of the biological father does not need to be complete, he can be absent either physically or emotionally, even though he remains in contact with the child. As the following cases illustrate, the interplay of relationships inside and outside a stepfamily influences children's attribution of fathering.

Anna – disengaged fathering

Even when Anna (25) remained in contact with her biological father, the relationship was often undermined by his behavior:

But he was lying and he used to trick me as a child – he said I'm sending you a birthday present, and my birthday is in November, and it was April, and nothing came. And he kept telling me every time we talked that it was on the way. So, when I told him that I didn't want it anymore, that he could keep it, then it came next week.

Despite maintaining some contact with her biological father, Anna attributed the father role to her stepfather (*I was happy, we played together, I had a daddy, I called him daddy from the start*). Even in adulthood, she refers to her stepfather simply as her father, using the term "biological father" only for differentiation. Owing to good relations in various stepfamily subsystems, the stepfather's engagement, and disappointment in the biological father, a strong stepfather-child bond developed that encompassed biological ties:

Many people thought that he is my biological father. People often said when they saw us together, that we look alike, that I totally looked like my father. It was very funny to us.

Greta – limited but positive contacts with a father

While disengaged fathering of a biological father can strongly contribute to the attribu-

tion of father role to a stepfather, our data also provide a situation in which both relationships – with a father and a stepfather are considered as positive and the father role is to a certain extent attributed to both of them (*Sincerely, I didn't mind. I still met my father, and in addition, there was another person, whom I felt fine to be around, that I liked* (Greta, 22). Greta was raised in her mother's stepfamily since the age of two, while maintaining contact with her biological father, initially frequently and later, when the family moved to a different state, during the vacations. Nevertheless, Greta still considers her relationship with her father as positive:

I have a good relationship with him as well, I go to visit him. When I was seven, we moved to Slovakia – me, my mother, my stepfather – but I always visited my father every year, sometimes for over a month in the summer, so we kept in touch by phone, and physically. And I always took it as a bonus when I went to see him.

At the same time, Greta clearly attributes a fathering role to her stepfather:

I've never considered it, I've always treated him as my own, and of course, he acted like it too. I've always taken it naturally because he's a person who takes care of me, he cares for me, and thus, when he scolded me, I took it as coming from a biological one. He's been raising me since I was two years old, trying to make me a better person, and I take it that way; I don't think about the difference, that he's not biological.

Greta grew up with two father figures in her life and considers both relationships as positive. Nevertheless, she attributes a prominent fatherly role to her stepfather, who continually supported her and stood by her side in crisis events. She further identifies her stepfather as her primary confidant:

With whom in the family have you been able to talk and say what you really think about different things?

R: Well, with my stepfather.

I: Who was the best person you could talk to about some of your expectations?

R: My stepfather.

I: About your feelings?

R: That would be both of them [stepfather and mother].

In both cases – Anna and Greta – the attribution of a fatherly role to the stepfather was facilitated by early involvement, emotional support, and consistent engagement of a stepfather, whereas the role of the biological father was either undermined by emotional absence or limited due to distance. In the first scenario, the child experiences the father's departure and the reduction of their mutual contacts as distressing, which consequently weakens the position of the father. A child reduces the emotionally demanding liminal experience by creating a stronger bond with the stepparent, who becomes more of a father than a non-father. Thus, the biological father loses his paternal position, although he remains a parent.

In the second scenario, the limited duration of forming a strong biological father–child bond means that children may not experience the liminal situations as intensely and more readily accept the stepfather's fathering role. However, the biological father remains the father figure. In cases where both relationships are positive, the frequency and quality of contact become decisive. Through daily involvement, care, and recognition, the stepfather – despite the absence of biological ties, which makes him a non-father – achieves the role of a "father" in the eyes of the child and broader social circle.

No One Is the Father

While a child's young age at the time of stepfamily formation may facilitate the development of a close bond with a stepfather – par-

ticularly in the context of a biological father's absence – our data underscore that the quality of the stepfather's engagement is critical for the attribution of a fathering role. The case of Bea (30) clearly illustrates this point. Although raised in her mother's stepfamily from early childhood and having only limited contact with her biological father, Bea does not recognize either man as her father. Bea recalls sporadic meetings with her biological father:

Sometimes [my father] would take me somewhere, but never to sleep over. It was always just during the day that he would take me to the carousel or to some activity, like swimming. He would always take one of my classmates with me so that I wouldn't feel stupid, but it wasn't very often.

These contacts gradually diminished over time. Although Bea referred to her stepfather as "father" in speech, this was not accompanied by genuine acknowledgment of a paternal role. She disclosed experiences of both psychological and physical violence perpetrated by her stepfather, which significantly damaged any potential for the development of a meaningful relationship:

I had a real fear of that father. It was like, I looked at my watch, when he was coming home, I heard the keys, the footsteps... Looking back, these were horrible feelings.

Furthermore, Bea noted that this abusive behavior was directed solely at her, with the stepfather favoring his biological child. Paired with a lack of protection from her mother's side (*she was closer to me, I expected from her to do something, to defend me*), Bea turned to her grandmother, whom she identified as her emotional refuge and most significant attachment figure:

I told her once, I totally remember, I was maybe ten, that I love her the most, more than my parents.

Bea's case demonstrates that in the absence of a supportive and safe relationship with ei-

ther her biological father or stepfather, she ultimately rejected both figures as paternal. Despite minimal contact with her biological father and verbal reference to her stepfather as “father,” she does not attribute a genuine father role to either man.

A similar pattern emerges in the case of Felix (20), though under different circumstances. Felix was entering adolescence when his stepfamily was formed. His biological father left when Felix was ten, relocated abroad, and ceased all contact:

I saw him at my grandfather’s funeral three years ago. But otherwise, nothing – he shows no interest.

Felix reports a generally positive and supportive relationship with his stepfather:

We were good friends. When I was younger, I needed someone like him to support my fun time, and he did it. That was fine.

He also acknowledges the stepfather’s positive influence on the family (*I can say we are much better since Mum has lived with this partner.*). Despite these affirmations, Felix consistently refers to him not as a father, but as his “mother’s partner”, although he recognizes the stepfather’s contributions to his upbringing:

He guided me in many things, I would say, that I missed as a child. Many times, I did something stupid, and he scolded me. Sometimes, I didn’t take it well. But at the end of the day, he always wanted the best for me.

Felix’s narrative highlights the challenges of forming a stepfather–child bond during adolescence. Even though the biological father is entirely absent and the stepfather is positively involved, the child may still withhold paternal attribution. Like Bea, Felix occupies a space in which no individual fully assumes the role of father – though unlike Bea, he offers partial recognition of the stepfather’s role.

A third pattern in our data reveals a more complex and ambivalent configuration, where

neither the biological father nor the stepfather is clearly embraced as “father,” yet both retain partial, symbolic presence. This pattern arises when the biological father is either absent or minimally present, and the stepfather is experienced as abusive or authoritarian. In such situations, the child may continue to use the term “father” for the stepfather but does so without emotional identification or endorsement. This results in a liminal space, where both men are perceived more as *non-fathers* than fathers, yet each retains a degree of paternal identity, however fragmented.

The age of the child at the time of stepfamily formation appears to be a significant factor in shaping these perceptions. Younger children may verbally assign the father role to a stepfather even in the face of negative behavior, due to limited reference points or dependency. In contrast, older children or adolescents – such as Felix – are more likely to withhold the term “father” and instead refer to the stepfather as the “mother’s partner,” even when his behavior is positive and engaged.

In these instances, the biological father is perceived as more of a *non-father* than a father, largely due to absence or disengagement. However, he is still symbolically acknowledged as a parent. The stepfather, through daily involvement and participation in the child’s upbringing, is more present and potentially more “father,” but may not be verbally or emotionally granted that status by the child, thus still being attributed as non-father.

The Risk of Oversimplification in Interpretation

As our data suggest, children interpret and manage liminal family situations in diverse ways, with some attributing the fathering role more to the biological father or to the stepfather, while others to neither of them. However, the dynamics of the stepfamily–biological

father interplay can be more intricate as the following quote illustrates:

Me and my younger brother....so I have two brothers. One is two years younger and the other is only 16 now. And he was actually ten or something at the time, and we tended more towards our father. When we had some free time, we spent it with him. And my middle brother, was the opposite, he cut off contact with father completely. And he spent his vacations and free time with mom and her partner. (Hilda, 24)

This example highlights the variability of father-role attribution even within the same household, where siblings – despite sharing similar surroundings, may align differently with paternal figures based on individual experiences, preferences, or relational dynamics. Such variability cautions against overly deterministic interpretations of co-parenting practices or relational configurations and suggests the importance of individual agency and sibling dynamics in shaping family relationships.

Discussion

This study examined the complex and multi-layered experiences of children navigating the liminal space that emerged through parental divorce and the formation of a stepfamily. Our findings highlight that children, in particular, often face a liminal experience in which they perceive both their non-residential biological fathers and their stepfathers as occupying ambiguous and possibly overlapping roles. These paternal figures are frequently experienced simultaneously as both “fathers and non-fathers” and “neither fathers nor non-fathers,” situating the child in a position of being *betwixt and between* (Turner, 1964).

Importantly, the two paternal figures in our research were never perceived as fully equivalent in the child’s eyes. Rather, children

tended to resolve this liminal dilemma by attributing the fathering role more to one figure than the other. In some cases, one father figure was viewed as “more father than non-father,” while the other was “more non-father than father.” In other instances, both figures were ultimately perceived as “more non-fathers than fathers,” resulting in the absence of a true paternal figure from the child’s perspective. Our findings thus broadly correspond with substitution and neglect concepts as proposed by Klaus et al. (2012).

In line with the existent research (Amato et al., 2009; Whiteside & Becker, 2000), the attribution of the fathering role was closely tied to both the *quantity* and *quality* of contact. For both biological fathers and stepfathers, the development of emotional closeness, mutual trust, and sustained involvement was essential to being recognized as a father figure. However, the underlying reasons for not attributing fatherhood differed between the two. In the case of biological fathers, diminished contact over time – both in frequency and quality – was a primary reason for the weakening of the paternal bond as previously stated by King and Sobolewski (2006). In contrast, no acknowledgement of the stepfather’s paternal role was influenced by several contextual factors already identified: the continued presence or involvement of the biological father (Gold, 2019), the age of the child at the time of the stepfamily formation (Ganong et al., 2011), and, as our data reveal, the presence of coercive or abusive behavior by the stepfather.

While the attribution of a paternal role to the biological father may appear more intuitive or normative, our analysis indicates that this process is contingent upon several supportive or constraining conditions. Consistent with existing research, we identified several factors that facilitated father-child bond: sustained engagement and emotional availability

ty, maternal support for ongoing co-parenting (Spaan et al., 2022), limited involvement of the stepfather in day-to-day parenting (Ganong et al., 2020), and the stepfather's willingness to adopt a more limited role within the family system.

If the paternal role is ascribed to a stepfather, this attribution seems not to be exclusively dependent on the quality of the stepfather-child relationship. Rather, it is also substantially shaped by the child's age at the time of stepfamily formation, and the extent to which the biological father is absent or disengaged. When children are young, they are generally more open to forming attachments with a stepfather (Ganong et al., 2011) and may more readily accept him as a substitute for a non-residential or absent biological father (Kalmijn, 2021). In contrast, adolescents tend to be less inclined to assign a paternal role to a stepfather, even in cases where the biological father is entirely absent. In such cases, the developmental stage of the child may create a barrier to the acceptance of the stepfather, regardless of his efforts.

In situations where both paternal figures are present, the frequency and quality of contact with each influence how the fathering role is attributed. In the context of "two fathers" (White & Gilbreth, 2001), the interdependency of children's relationships with both the biological father and the stepfather becomes evident. While previous studies have typically focused either on the influence of a non-residential biological father's presence on the stepfather-child relationship (Braithwaite et al., 2006) or the inverse effect – how the presence of a stepfather shapes the biological father-child bond (Stephens, 1996) – our findings indicate a reciprocal, bidirectional dynamic confirming findings of Hornstra et al. (2020).

Furthermore, while existing literature acknowledges that children can maintain posi-

tive relationships with both father figures simultaneously (Jensen & Ganong, 2020), our study suggests that, in practice, the attribution of the fathering role leans more toward one of them. This may not negate the presence or influence of the other, but it indicates an asymmetry in how children interpret paternal roles.

Limitations

One of the limitations of our study is the reliance on retrospective accounts from adult participants who were raised in stepfamilies. While these interviews offer a valuable perspective on the evolution of familial relationships, they may also be influenced by memory biases or shaped by the participant's current life stage. On one hand, the accuracy of childhood recollections can be questioned; on the other hand, this reflective distance allows for more nuanced and integrative understandings of complex family dynamics and turning points. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study limits the generalizability of the findings, which should be interpreted as exploratory. Nevertheless, despite the small sample, a wide range of variations emerged in how participants navigated and attributed the fathering role, underscoring the complexity of these experiences. By attending to children's perspectives, this research contributes to the understanding of how paternal meanings are constructed, blurred, and sometimes withheld.

Future Directions

Building on these insights, future research should further investigate the nuanced and evolving dynamics between children, biological fathers, and stepfathers, especially in contexts where both paternal figures are simultaneously involved in the child's life. Such dual fatherhood can result in what might be termed

“multiple liminalities,” in which children cope with ambiguous or conflicting paternal roles. These conditions can lead to loyalty conflicts (Papernow, 2018), which, as prior work suggests, may be mitigated through cooperative interactions between the biological father and the stepfather (White & Gilbreth, 2001). Therefore, attention should also be directed toward the nature of the interaction between these two father figures and how it impacts the child’s relational experience. Moreover, future studies should explore the bidirectional influence between the father–child and stepfather–child relationships. A more integrative understanding of these interdependencies could enhance stepfamily scholarship. Future research might also explore how the liminal states such as separation or stepfamily formation are shaped by developmental changes, family dynamics, and broader sociocultural norms over time.

Finally, both academic inquiry and family interventions should strive toward integrative frameworks that consider the child’s broader relational network rather than focusing solely on isolated dyadic ties. Recognizing how children navigate liminal and ambivalent paternal figures can lead to more effective support systems. Interventions addressing relational ambiguity and promoting supportive family ties with both father figures can better foster resilience and well-being in complex stepfamily systems.

Conclusion

This study highlights the deeply liminal nature of children’s experiences within stepfamilies, where paternal roles are often ambiguous, shifting, and context-dependent. Children frequently navigate a space of “in-betweenness,” perceiving biological fathers and stepfathers as both fathers and non-fathers. The attribution of the fathering role is not fixed,

but emerges through a dynamic interplay of factors, including the child’s age at the time of stepfamily formation, the emotional and physical availability (or absence) of each paternal figure, and the broader relational environment. Importantly, children do not passively absorb existing family roles but actively resolve ambiguity by assigning greater paternal significance to one figure or, in some cases, to neither.

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