

## **Stepfamily Instability in Canada: New Insights Based on a Comparison of Male and Female Reports**

Martin, Valerie, McGill University, Department of sociology  
855 Sherbrooke west, Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3A 2T7  
[Valerie.martin3@mail.mcgill.ca](mailto:Valerie.martin3@mail.mcgill.ca)

Le Bourdais, Céline, McGill University, Department of sociology  
855 Sherbrooke west, Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3A 2T7  
[Celine.lebourdais@mcgill.ca](mailto:Celine.lebourdais@mcgill.ca)

Telephone: 514-398-6840; Fax : 514-398-1722

### **Introduction**

Given the high divorce rates, the number of stepfamilies has increased over the years. In spite of the high level of instability documented in studies conducted in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., White and Booth, 1985; Teachman, 1986; Clarke and Wilson, 1994), the risk of separation in stepfamilies, surprisingly, has received very little attention in recent research.

This study aims to fill this gap. It uses a large recent retrospective survey, the 2001 Canadian General Social Survey (GSS) on family, that collected the family histories of nearly 25,000 male and female respondents. The increased incidence of stepfamilies, combined to the large size of the sample, yields a large enough number of individuals who have experienced a stepfamily episode for us to conduct an in-depth study of the conditions surrounding the risk of a couple to break up. More precisely, our analysis examines (1) the timing of separation and (2) the circumstances that affect the risk of stepfamily couples to separate. In contrast to previous studies that were almost exclusively based on female reports, our study includes the information provided by both male and female respondents.

### **Theoretical Background and Research Question**

Two main theoretical explanations have been advanced to account for why stepfamilies might be at greater risk of breaking up than intact families: Cherlin's (1978) notion that stepfamilies are incomplete institutions and Jacobson's (1995) idea that stepfamilies need developing a "mini culture" in order to establish family bonds that last. Jacobson focuses more specifically on the difficulties of how to behave in stepfamilies, while Cherlin centers his attention on social norms, or more precisely the lack of existing social norms showing stepfamily members how to behave. Both authors provide useful insights about stepfamily functioning and offer a theoretical framework to analyze stepfamilies.

Role ambiguity is a major concern when studying stepfamilies, since becoming a stepparent is more an achieved than an ascribed status, and can be achieved in quite various ways. It varies according to whether one becomes a stepfather or a stepmother, whether one has experienced or not a separation before entering into a stepfamily, and whether it is or not the first experience of being involved in a parental role. Past research has shown that the type of the stepfamily is closely associated with stepfamily outcome (Desrosiers et al., 1995). Which of stepmother or stepfather families are the most stable? Some studies suggest that stepmother families tend to be more stable, because women are more likely to invest in family life and to try to establish good relations with their stepchildren (Teachman, 1986; Desrosiers et al., 1995; Marcil-Gratton et al., 2003). Others argue that stepfathering is easier, because the stepfather occupies a place that is often left empty after the biological father departed (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1994) or because expectations towards stepfathers are lower than those towards biological fathers (Fine, 1995). One should note, however, that these hypotheses were developed when examining relationships between stepfamily members and not when studying family stability per se. Another dimension that needs to be taken into account when distinguishing stepfather families is whether the woman had or not a union before the formation of the family. In stepfamilies in which the mother had a previous union, the biological father might be still around and the stepfather may be less welcome in the child's life than in cases where the woman had no earlier union.

The arrival of a common child has often been shown to be a stabilizing factor of stepfamilies (Teachman, 1986; Wineberg, 1992; Desrosiers et al., 1995). One might argue that a 'blended' family, that is, one in which a child is born, more closely resembles an intact family. At least one child is linked biologically to all members of the stepfamily, and the parents are the common biological parents of at least one child.

The type of union adopted by the couple also appears to be linked to the stability of the family. Cohabiting stepfamilies are not as clearly established and they have been shown to be less stable than married stepfamilies (Manning and Lamb, 2003; Marcil-Gratton et al., 2000). However, as common-law unions become increasingly popular, the gap separating cohabiting and married stepfamilies could decrease. Hence, in Quebec where cohabitation is much more common than in the rest of Canada, we would expect cohabiting stepfamily couples to be more likely to separate than married couples, but the difference separating the two groups should be smaller than elsewhere in Canada.

## **Data and Methods**

Our analysis is based on the 2001 General Social Survey (GSS). The 2001 survey on the family collected detailed information on the composition of households, on the respondents' families of origin, and on a series of individual and household socioeconomic characteristics. The GSS sample is representative of the entire population aged 15 years and older living in Canada, excluding the residents of Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, as well as full-time residents of institutions (Statistics Canada 2001). The GSS on family also comprises a large retrospective component in which the respondents' education and work histories were collected. Respondents were also asked to record the history of their unions (marriages or common-law unions) and of

all the children they had given birth to, adopted and/or raised. For each union, we know the date of the beginning and of the end of the union and, if so, the way it ended. For each child, we have the date of birth, as well as the date of arrival in the respondent's household of adopted and step-children; we also know the date at which the child left the household for the last time. This information allowed us to reconstruct the stepfamily episodes that respondents had experienced through the course of their life. The analysis here is based solely on first stepfamily episodes (N=2079).

Our study uses Kaplan-Meier estimations and proportional hazard models that are well suited to study the timing of the conjugal separation among stepfamilies and the circumstances, which may vary over time, that are associated with the risk of breaking up.

A stepfamily is defined as a couple living together (married or common law) with at least one child who is not the biological or adopted child of one of the two partners. Only families with children under the age of 21 are included in the analysis. We differentiate stepfamilies into stepmother, stepfather, and stepmother/stepfather families, depending upon the origin of the children. Stepfamily episodes are censored, i.e. considered as no longer at risk of facing separation, from the moment one of the partners dies or the last stepchild leaves the household.

Almost all previous research on stepfamilies focuses solely on the family experiences of women. The 2001 GSS allows us to take into consideration not only the family histories reported by female respondents, but also those declared by men. It will allow us to directly analyse the characteristics and circumstances leading to the decision to have a common child from the point of view of men, and to see how they differ from those observed for women. In our analyses, we also control for the age of the parents, the age and number of children in the household, the period of entry into the stepfamily, and the respondent's mother tongue, religion, education and work status.

## **Results**

Our analysis provides some evidence that the arrival of a common child strengthens the stepfamily, and more so among families reported by male respondents. In both samples, couples living in a common-law union were found to be more likely to break up than those who were married. We did not, however, find that the gap separating married and cohabiting couples was smaller in Quebec than elsewhere Canada. Interestingly, education and employment status, which were found in previous studies to be key determinants of union instability, especially for women, did not show any significant effect. The type of stepfamily was shown to be closely associated with the risk of family break-up, but to differ across male and female respondents.

Perhaps, the most interesting finding of our analysis lies in the differences in findings observed between the stepfamily episodes reported by men and those reported by women regarding their risk of separation. Among female respondents, stepmother families were found to be the most stable, i.e. to face the lowest risk of separation; in the male sample, we found the opposite result, with stepmother families exhibiting a significantly higher risk of separation compared to stepfather families. Part of this result is probably related to

the retrospective nature of the data and to a selectivity bias in reaching men and women. It does, however, question some of the findings of previous studies.

First, as most children stay with their mothers after a separation, stepfather families are the most common type of stepfamilies. These families tend to be overrepresented in the female sample as compared to the male sample, since separated fathers prove difficult to reach by surveys and are likely to underreport their children with whom they do not live. Second, because of the retrospective nature of the survey, for any given type of family, one can expect that only when the stepfamily episode constituted a significant event in the life of the respondents and when the latter were intensively involved in raising stepchildren, will stepfamily episodes be reported by stepparents; in contrast, stepfamily episodes are probably more likely to be identified from the information provided by respondents who had biological children in a previous relation and further declared living with a partner, who did not necessarily play an active role in raising these children. If such is the case, the stepfamily episodes reported by stepparents, men or women, will on average be of longer duration than those reported by biological parents. This probably accounts for the higher stability that we observed among stepmother families identified from females' reports and among the stepfather families identified from the male sample. Clearly, our analysis questions the validity of previous studies based solely on female reports, which concluded that stepmother families are more stable than stepfather families. It also highlights the necessity of conducting separate analyses for male and female respondents if we are to gain a better understanding of stepfamily life.

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