

PAA 2007 Abstract

The Transition from Stepfamilies into Blended Families in Canada

Valerie Martin and Céline Le Bourdais

McGill University, Department of Sociology

Introduction

Most previous research on stepfamilies has focused on their instability. While there is an abundance of qualitative publications with a focus on psychological aspects of stepfamily life, until recently, quantitative research on stepfamilies remains relatively rare. However, given the high divorce rates and the increasing number of children who experience life within stepfamilies and witness the arrival of half siblings, research on stepfamilies is becoming critical. Since the beginning of the new millennium, several European and American studies have analyzed fertility in stepfamilies and have focused on the transition from a stepfamily into a blended family (see Vikat et al., 1999; Thomson et al., 2000; Jefferies et al., 2000; Brown, 2000; Prskawetz et al., 2002; Henz, 2002; Thomson and Allen-Li, 2002, Thomson, 2004; Vikat et al., 2004; Allen-Li, 2006). One of the first studies related to this topic was conducted in Canada by Juby et al. Published in 2001, it used data from the 1994-1995 NLSCY (National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth) and the 1990 GSS (General Social Survey) on family. Here, we use a more recent and much larger survey (24,310 respondents), the 2001 GSS on family. The increased incidence of stepfamilies, combined with the large size of the sample, should yield a large enough number of stepfamilies for us to conduct an in-depth study of the conditions surrounding the decision of couples to have a common child and to what extent they have changed across cohorts. More precisely, our analyses (1) examine the timing of the transition from a stepfamily into a blended family and (2) consider the circumstances under which a stepfamily decides to have a common child.

Theoretical Background and Research Questions

Some scholars (e.g. Griffith et al., 1985; Vikat et al., 2004) argue that stepfamily couples base their decision for having a child together on the same reasons as those living in intact families. This decision is seen as a means of confirming the transition into

adulthood and as a validation of the marriage/partnership, no matter the type of family. As well, the birth of an additional child is often desired in order to avoid a one-child family, and to provide the children already in the family with a direct or half-sibling. These three motivations are known in the literature as the parenthood effect, the commitment effect and the sibling effect (Vikat et al., 2004). In addition, stepfamilies might feel that the arrival of a common child can act as a binding force for all members of the family, who do not necessarily share common ties, thus making them a more "complete family".

Previous research on stepfamilies is very heterogeneous and not without limitations. Several studies conducted in the United States focus solely on remarriages and include childless unions as well as those with children (e.g. Wineberg 1990; Griffith et al., 1985). Some other studies include cohabiting unions, that often precede the formation of stepfamilies (e.g. Thomson and Allen-Li, 2002), but they are still largely neglected in most research (e.g. Allen-Li, 2006).

In all mentioned studies, there are consistent findings that the age of the youngest child is a key determinant in the decision to have a common child or not. The results suggest that the lower the age of the youngest child in the stepfamily, the more likely the chances that a common child will be born. Research also shows that women who enter a stepfamily without a child of their own (stepmother families) are more likely to have a common child than those who already have at least one child (stepfather families) (e.g. Juby et al., 2001; Thomson et al., 2002; Vikat et al., 2004).

An additional key factor for the decision to have a common child in a stepfamily seems to be the age of the woman when she begins her stepfamily episode (e.g Wineberg, 1990; Vikat et al., 1999; Juby et al., 2001). The younger a woman is when entering into a stepfamily, the more likely she is to give birth.

Brown (2000) advances an interesting hypothesis with regard to common-law unions in the United States. She hypothesizes that couples living in common-law unions will be more likely to have a common child than married couples. Her rationale is that common-law couples need *something* more than married couples to cement their relationship (union-commitment argument). Given that common-law unions are less stable than marriages (Marcil-Gratton et al., 2000) and that stepfamilies may need

something additional to cement their relationship than other types of families, one could expect common-law stepfamily couples to be more likely to have a common child than married stepfamily couples.

Brown's (2000) argument is based on the United States, where common-law unions are less widely accepted and established than in Canada. Differences do, however, exist between regions in Canada. For example, in the English part of Canada, common-law unions are less frequent than in the Francophone province of Quebec. For common-law couples in the English part of Canada, a common child may thus carry more weight in regard to reinforcing the relationship than in Quebec, where common-law unions have practically replaced the institution of marriage.

To recapitulate, given the findings of previous research, we formulate the following hypotheses for Canada:

H1: Stepfamilies where the youngest pre-union child living within the stepfamily is a preschooler are more likely to make the transition from a stepfamily into a blended family than stepfamilies where the youngest pre-union child living within the stepfamily is already in school.

H2: Stepmother families are more likely to make the transition from a stepfamily into a blended family than stepfather families.

H3: The younger the age of the women upon entering into a stepfamily, the more likely they are to make a transition into a blended family.

H4: Among stepfamily couples living in common-law unions, those in the Anglophone part of Canada are more likely to have a child together than those in Quebec.

Data and Methods

Our analysis is based on the 2001 General Social Survey (GSS). The 2001 survey on the family collected detailed information about the composition of households, on the respondents' families of origin, on fertility intentions as well as on a series of individual and household socioeconomic characteristics. 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.

The GSS sample is representative of the entire population age 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. The interviews were conducted from February 2001 to December 2001. The non-response rate was 21% and interviews were completed with 24,310 respondents (Statistics Canada 2001).

This study uses proportional hazard models that are well suited to study the timing of the transition from a stepfamily into a blended family in relation to the circumstances under which a stepfamily decides to have an additional child.

The above-mentioned studies do not share a common definition of what constitutes a stepfamily. For the purpose of this paper, a stepfamily is defined as a couple living together (married or common law) in the same household with at least one child who is not the biological or adopted child of one of the two partners. We differentiate stepfamilies into stepmother, stepfather, and stepmother/stepfather families depending upon the origin of the children.

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.

Conclusion

The transition from a stepfamily into a blended family is an important step in the life of a stepfamily. In this paper, we examine this transition and focus on key determinants that have been shown to influence the decision of couples to have an additional child, such as: the age of the youngest child, the type of stepfamily, the age of the mother, and type of union in interaction with the region of residence. On the whole, we hope to be able to better explain under which circumstances a stepfamily decides to have an additional child, thereby furthering this important aspect of stepfamily research.

References

- Allen-Li, J.C. (2006): The institutionalization and pace of fertility in American stepfamilies. In: *Demographic Research*, 14, p. 237-266
- Brown, S. (2000): Fertility Following Marital Dissolution. The Role of Cohabitation. In: *Journal of Family Issues*, 21, p. 501-524
- Desrosiers, H., Le Bourdais, C. and Laplante, B. (1995): Les dissolutions d'union dans les familles recomposées: l'expérience des femmes canadiennes. In: *Recherches sociographiques*, XXXVI: p. 47-64
- Griffith, J. D., Koo, H.P. and Suchindran, C.M. (1985): Childbearing and Family in Remarriage. In: *Demography*, 22, p. 73-88
- Henz, U. (2002): Childbirth in East and West German Stepfamilies. Estimated Probabilities from Hazard Rate Models. In: *Demographic Research*, 7, p. 307-342
- Jeffries, J. Berrington, A. and Diamond, I. (2000): Childbearing Following Marital Dissolution in Britain. In: *European journal of Population*, 16, p. 193-210
- Juby, H., Marcil-Gratton, N. and Le Bourdais, C. (2001): A Step Further in Family Life: The Emergence of the Blended Family. In: Bélanger, A. Report on the Demographic Situation in Canada 2000, Ottawa, Statistics Canada (cat. 91-209), p. 169-203
- Marcil-Gratton, N., Le Bourdais, C. and Lapierre-Adamcyck, E. (2000): The Implications of Parents' Conjugal Histories for Children. In: *ISUMA: Canadian Journal of Policy Research*, 1, p. 32-40
- Prskawetz, A., Vikat, A., Philipov, D. and Engelhardt, H. (2002): Pathways to Stepfamily Formation in Europe: Results from the FFS. MPRIDR. Working Paper WP 2002-046
- Statistics Canada (2001): General Social Survey, Cycle 15: The Family. Public Use Microdata File Documentation and User's Guide. Ottawa
- Thomson, E., Hoem, J.M., Vikat, A., Prskawetz, A., Buber, I., Toulemon, L., Henz, U. and Godecker, A. L. (2000). Union Commitment, Parental Status, and Sibling Relationships as Sources of Stepfamily Fertility in Austria, Finland, France, and West Germany. Paper prepared for the Fertility and Family Survey Flagship Conference, May 2000
- Thomson, E. and Allen Li, J.C. (2002). Her, His and Their Children: Childbearing Intentions and Birth in Stepfamilies. In: NSFH working paper no. 89

- Thomsosn, E. (2004). Step-families and Childbearing Desires in Europe. In:
Demographic Research, 3, p. 116-134
- Vikat, A., Thomson, E. and Hoem, J.M. (1999): Stepfamily fertility in contemporary
Sweden: The impact of childbearing before the current union. In: Population Studies,
53, p. 211-225
- Vikat, A., Thomson, E. and Prskawetz, A. (2004): Childbearing Responsibility and
Stepfamily Fertility in Finland and Austria. In: European Journal of Population, 20, p.
1- 21
- Wineberg, H. (1990): Childbearing after Remarriage. In: Journal of Marriage and the
Family, 52, p. 31-38