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**FAMILY CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP QUALITY OF
YOUNG ADULTS FROM MARRIED STEPFAMILIES**

A Thesis in

Sociology and Demography

by

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ABSTRACT

This study uses data from Waves I and IV of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) to examine the association between the quality of various family relationships in adolescence (e.g., mother-stepfather, mother-adolescent, stepfather-adolescent, and nonresident biological father-adolescent) and offspring romantic relationship quality in young adulthood for youth in married stepfamilies. A contribution of this study is that youth in married stepfamilies are examined as their own group, rather than being compared to children living with their two married, biological parents. Additionally, this study examines the influence of nonresident biological fathers, which is a relationship that is especially relevant to children in stepfamilies. This study finds that the quality of the mother-stepfather and mother-adolescent relationships are positively associated with offspring romantic relationship quality in young adulthood.

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INTRODUCTION

Family scholars have devoted extensive time and attention to studying offspring romantic relationships because higher quality romantic relationships are associated with a host of positive outcomes, including greater subjective well-being and fewer depressive symptoms (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005), better physical health (Bookwala, 2005), and a lower risk of substance abuse (Whisman, 2007). Much of the research that examines how parents contribute to offspring romantic relationships focuses on the influence of parental divorce and interparental conflict (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995; Cui, Fincham, & Pasley, 2008). Less is known about how the quality of parent-child relationships among married stepfamilies contributes to offspring romantic relationships in young adulthood. Stepfamilies have generally been neglected in the literature that examines how parents contribute to offspring romantic relationship quality in young adulthood. Therefore, we know practically nothing about the role of stepfathers and nonresident biological fathers on offspring romantic relationships. Stepfathers have either been excluded from samples, or studies do not distinguish whether respondents are reporting on biological fathers or stepfathers. Given that families have become much more diverse and complex over the past few decades due to increases in divorce, remarriage, cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing, it is not sufficient to study the effects of parental divorce on offspring romantic relationship quality, and not take into consideration whether these parents remarried or not, especially since most people who divorce will eventually remarry (Kreider & Fields, 2002).

Due to high rates of repartnering, many children are spending time in stepfamilies. Indeed, about 30% of all children will spend time in a cohabiting or married stepfamily (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995). However, stepfamilies have not received much attention in the literature regarding the impact of families on offspring romantic relationship quality. Given that stepfamilies have become much more common, it is important to understand processes that

occur within this type of family, and to understand why some children raised in stepfamilies do better than others. I use nationally representative, longitudinal data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) to examine how the quality of relationships between parents (mother-stepfather) and relationships between parents and children during adolescence (mother-adolescent, stepfather-adolescent, and nonresident biological father-adolescent) influence offspring romantic relationship quality in young adulthood.

BACKGROUND

The present study is rooted in two theories: social learning theory and attachment theory. Social learning theory contends that individuals learn behaviors and attitudes through observing the behaviors and attitudes of others (Bandura, 1977). High-quality mother-stepfather relationships may be important for high-quality offspring romantic relationships, because if the mother-stepfather relationship is high-quality, offspring may indirectly learn important skills from that relationship that would be beneficial in their own romantic relationships, such as how to express love and affection to one's partner, how to handle conflict when it inevitably arises, and how to compromise. Alternatively, witnessing low-quality mother-stepfather relationships may deprive offspring of knowledge about relationship behaviors that are conducive to relationship success. Additionally, if the mother-stepfather relationship is low-quality, then offspring may be hesitant to form their own romantic relationships, or pessimistic about the likelihood that their romantic relationships will be high-quality and successful.

Attachment theory posits that relationships with primary caregivers (most often the parents) influence children's internal working models of relationships, which impact close relationships later in life (Ainsworth, 1991). Those whose parents were emotionally available and responsive to their needs are more likely to expect romantic partners to be emotionally

available and responsive, whereas those whose parents were emotionally distant may be more likely to be emotionally distant and have trouble with intimacy in their romantic relationships. These different attachment styles produce different views about romantic love (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), which presumably affect romantic relationship quality. It is not hard to imagine that a person who believes that romantic love never lasts would have lower quality romantic relationships than someone who believes that romantic love never fades (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

When examining parental influences on offspring romantic relationships, family scholars have generally focused on parental divorce and interparental conflict (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995; Amato & Booth, 2001; Cui, Fincham, & Pasley, 2008; Wolfinger, 1999), and social learning theory has received much support in this literature. Findings have shown that those whose parents experienced a divorce have lower quality romantic relationships (Cui & Fincham, 2010) and a higher likelihood of divorcing themselves, compared to offspring whose parents remained married to each other-- a phenomenon known as the “intergenerational transmission of divorce” (Amato, 1996; Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Teachman, 2002). Numerous explanations have been given for children of divorce reporting lower quality romantic relationships and the intergenerational transmission of divorce, including having more negative attitudes toward marriage and more favorable attitudes toward divorce (Axinn & Thornton, 1996; Cui, Fincham, & Durtschi, 2010), lack of commitment in their romantic relationships (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Whitton et al., 2008), and more interpersonal problems (e.g., anger, jealousy, and poor communication; Amato, 1996).

Unfortunately, these studies do not consider the impact that a parental remarriage may have on offspring romantic relationship quality. Most people who divorce will eventually

remarry (Kreider & Fields, 2002), so only taking parental divorce into account without parental remarriage is incomplete. Additionally, examining parental divorce may not be the best approach to understanding more about parental influences on offspring romantic relationship quality in young adulthood. Families today are more complex than ever before, and while there are many children whose parents have divorced, there are also many children whose parents were never married to each other. In 1960, only about 5% of births were to unmarried women (Ventura & Bachrach, 2000). In 1980, around the time in which Add Health respondents were born, this figure more than tripled, to about 18% of births (Hamilton et al., 2014). Given that nonmarital childbearing was on the rise when Add Health respondents were born, it may be better to examine how family processes (e.g., conflict), rather than family structure or parental divorce, influence offspring romantic relationship quality.

Some family scholars have argued that family processes matter more for children's well-being than family structure (e.g., Demo, 1992; Lansford et al., 2001). Regarding offspring romantic relationship quality, studies have found a positive association between interparental conflict and conflict in offspring romantic relationships (Amato & Booth, 2001; Simon & Furman, 2010; Stocker & Richmond, 2007). Additionally, interparental conflict is negatively associated with offspring romantic relationship quality and efficacy (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Cui, Fincham, & Pasley, 2008).

To my knowledge, only one study has considered how negative interactions in a parental remarriage may affect offspring romantic relationship quality in young adulthood. Yu and Adler-Baeder (2007) assessed mother-father relationship quality (measured using children's perceptions of negative interactions in these relationships) for respondents who had stable married, divorced, and remarried parents. For those whose parents remarried, mother-stepfather

relationship quality was positively associated with offspring romantic relationship quality, and this relationship had more of an impact on offspring romantic relationships than did mothers' first marriages. However, this study has a couple of limitations. The first (and major) limitation of this study is that offspring reported on their parents' relationship quality. A second limitation is that the data were from a convenience sample ($n = 513$), and were not nationally representative. My study will use mother-reported relationship quality with stepfathers, and utilize a nationally representative dataset.

Though much of the research on family influences on offspring romantic relationship quality in young adulthood focuses on parental divorce or conflict in interparental relationships, there is some literature that examines how parenting during adolescence influences offspring romantic relationships later in life. For example, Dalton et al. (2006) conducted a study using a sample of respondents raised with two married, biological parents that examined how parenting behaviors in childhood were associated with romantic relationship quality in young adulthood. They found that young adults who reported more positive parenting behaviors (e.g., warm and responsive parenting) when they were children had higher quality romantic relationships. Additionally, they found that mothers' parenting behaviors were more strongly associated with offspring romantic relationship quality than were fathers' parenting behaviors. However, these reports of parenting behaviors were retrospective, which is a limitation of the study because memory could be affected by how one feels about one's parent at the moment. Additionally, parenting behaviors were measured, rather than parent-child relationship quality. Though these are undoubtedly related, they are also a bit different. Parenting behaviors refer to specific behaviors that parents engage in, while parent-child relationship quality refers to the overall climate of the relationship. However, parenting behaviors and parent-child relationship quality

are related due to parenting behaviors being associated with adolescents' attachment to their parents (Karavasilis, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 2003).

A few studies have directly examined how parent-child relationship quality (rather than parenting behaviors) in adolescence influences romantic relationship quality in young adulthood. What has generally been found is that higher quality relationships with parents during adolescence are positively associated with romantic relationship quality in adulthood, providing support for attachment theory. Johnson and Galambos (2014) used the Add Health dataset and found a positive association between parent-child relationship quality during adolescence and offspring romantic relationship quality in young adulthood. They used three indicators to create a latent variable of parent-adolescent relationship quality (parent-reported parent-adolescent relationship quality, adolescent-reported mother-adolescent relationship quality, and adolescent-reported father-adolescent relationship quality), but this approach does not allow one to examine which parent-adolescent relationship matters most for offspring romantic relationships. Further, this study did not control for family structure or distinguish between which types of fathers adolescents were reporting on (i.e., biological father or stepfather).

Other studies have replicated the finding that parent-child relationship quality is positively associated with offspring romantic relationship quality later in life. For example, Flouri and Buchanan (2002) conducted a longitudinal study that examined how the quality of family relationships at age 16 affected marital satisfaction at age 33, with a sample of British men and women born in 1958. They found that better quality relationships with mothers and fathers were associated with more satisfying marital relationships (Flouri & Buchanan, 2002). Although this study did not focus on stepfamilies, the findings could also hold true for this type of family. If adolescents have good relationships with their parents (biological or otherwise),

then this may positively influence their internal working model of relationships, which might make it easier to have good relationships with romantic partners later in life. Thus, processes that occur within nuclear families might also be applicable to adolescents raised in stepfamilies.

Another study examined the influence of parent-adolescent relationship quality on Israeli adolescent girls' romantic relationships, and found that father-adolescent relationship quality was more strongly associated with offspring romantic relationship quality both concurrently and longitudinally than mother-adolescent relationship quality (Scharf & Mayseless, 2008). This study indicates that a shared attachment to a biological father matters more for romantic relationship quality than a shared attachment to the mother. For adolescents raised in stepfamilies, this could mean that having a shared attachment to a nonresident biological father would be more strongly associated with offspring romantic relationship quality than having a shared attachment to a mother or even a stepfather. However, it is unclear whether the stronger influence of biological fathers would also be present in stepfamilies, given that mothers have been the most stable parental figures, and the fact that stepfathers' roles are not clearly defined and are more variable, due to the incomplete institutionalization of stepfamilies (Cherlin, 1978).

Unfortunately, the influence of nonresident father-adolescent closeness has not been examined, so it is also unclear whether stepfathers have a stronger effect on offspring romantic relationships, or whether nonresident fathers have a stronger effect. On the one hand, the fact that adolescents are living with and interact daily with their stepfathers could mean that the stepfather-adolescent relationship may be more consequential for offspring romantic relationships. Alternatively, being biologically related to the nonresident father and having a shared history and an early attachment to him may mean that the nonresident biological father-adolescent relationship matters more for offspring romantic relationships. Another possibility is

that neither the stepfather-adolescent relationship nor the nonresident biological father-adolescent relationship could matter for children's romantic relationships in young adulthood; it is possible that only the mother-adolescent relationship could impact the quality of young adult romantic relationships.

Regarding attachment theory, earlier research suggested that the mother was the primary attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969), but later research moved beyond the mother-child relationship and examined fathers as attachment figures (Brown et al., 2007). Though mothers and fathers may both influence attachment style, the quality of the mother-adolescent relationship may be especially critical in stepfamilies, given that the mother has been the most stable parental figure. Thus, the mother may have the strongest influence on the quality of offspring romantic relationships. Because the literature is not clear about which family relationships matter most for offspring romantic relationship quality, my study aims to fill in these gaps.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The goal of the present study is to determine the extent to which the quality of various family relationships in adolescence influence offspring romantic relationship quality during young adulthood. Specifically, this study examines the role of mother-stepfather, mother-adolescent, stepfather-adolescent, and nonresident biological father-adolescent relationship quality on offspring romantic relationship quality. It was important to control for qualities and characteristics that have been found to be associated with the quality of parent-child relationships and/or romantic relationships. These include offspring gender, offspring race, number of years in the stepfamily at Wave I, type of union of offspring, duration of offspring's current romantic relationship, whether the mother and stepfather separated by Wave III, number of marriages and

cohabitations mothers had in the past 18 years, mother's education, and household income at Wave I.

Studies examining gender differences in mother-adolescent relationship quality yield mixed findings. Some studies have found no gender differences in mother-adolescent relationship quality (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998), whereas other studies have found that girls report being closer to their biological mothers than do boys (Mayseless, Wiseman, & Hai, 1998), and other studies have found that boys report being closer to their biological mothers than girls (Stamps Mitchell, Booth, & King, 2009). Boys generally report higher quality relationships with both stepfathers and nonresident biological fathers than girls (Jensen & Shafer, 2013; King, 2007; King, Harris, & Heard, 2004; King, Thorsen, & Amato, 2014). Women generally report less marital satisfaction than do men (Fowers, 1991; Jackson, Miller, Oka, & Henry, 2014).

Regarding race, prior research has found that Blacks have higher quality relationships with their mothers than non-Blacks (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998; Lawton, Silverstein, & Bengtson, 1994). Research has also found that compared to Whites, Hispanics, and Asians, Blacks report being closest to their nonresident biological fathers (King et al., 2004; Thomas, Krampe, & Newton, 2008). Regarding romantic relationships, Blacks report lower marital quality than Whites and Mexican Americans (Bulanda & Brown, 2007). Blacks are also more likely than Whites to believe that they will divorce and to experience divorce (Trent & South, 2003; Sweeney & Phillips, 2004). Mexican Americans, however, view marriage more favorably than Whites (Oropesa, 1996), and report fewer marital problems than Whites (Bulanda & Brown, 2007). I controlled for number of years in a stepfamily at Wave I because research has found that living with stepfathers for a longer duration of time is positively associated with stepfather-adolescent closeness (King, 2006).

The type of union offspring were in was controlled for because research has shown that cohabiting couples report lower romantic relationship quality than married couples (Nock, 1995; Brown & Booth, 1996; Halliday Hardie & Lucas, 2010). Regarding the duration of the romantic relationship, romantic relationship quality has been found to decline over time (Umberson et al., 2005; VanLaningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001).

I controlled for whether the mother and stepfather separated by Wave III because research has shown that parental divorce adversely affects children's romantic relationships (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Jacquet & Surra, 2001). If children experience two interparental relationship dissolutions, rather than one, then the effect of parental divorce on the offspring's romantic relationships may be especially pronounced. Furthermore, if the mother and stepfather separate by Wave III, then the respondent's relationship with his or her former stepfather may be disrupted, especially if the stepchild did not view the stepfather as a legitimate family member during the remarriage (Coleman et al., 2015). I used this variable at Wave III because Add Health did not ask about whether the mother and stepfather were still together at Wave IV, and it is unlikely that a significant amount of parents who were still together at Wave III ended up separating by Wave IV, especially since their marriages were strong enough to span at least 7 years. The number of maternal marriages and cohabitations over the past 18 years is a proxy for prior family instability that children have experienced, which is positively associated with offspring union instability (Amato & Patterson, 2016). Additionally, mothers who have had a greater number of romantic relationships in the past 18 years arguably have lower quality romantic relationships than those who have experienced fewer of these relationships.

Parental educational attainment and family income are measures of the socioeconomic

background of adolescents, and these variables were important to control for because they are positively associated with parental involvement (Cooksey & Fondell, 1996) and romantic relationship quality (Conger et al., 1990; Halliday Hardie & Lucas, 2010). Financial instability was controlled for because it is associated with relationship dissolution and divorce (Hoffman & Duncan, 1995; Lewin, 2005).

This study offers several contributions. The major contribution of this study is that processes that occur within married stepfamilies are examined, as these families have not received adequate attention in the literature that examines how families influence romantic relationship quality. Furthermore, given that nonresident biological fathers are particularly relevant in stepfamilies, the quality of the nonresident biological father-adolescent relationship is also examined, which also adds to the body of literature. Another contribution is that adolescents reported on relationship quality with their parents as they were adolescents (rather than retrospectively), which allows for greater accuracy in how they perceive the quality of these relationships. Finally, this study utilizes data from a nationally representative dataset, which means that generalizations to the population at large can be made.

DATA and METHODS

Data for this study come from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health). When appropriate sample weights are used, Add Health is a nationally representative sample of adolescents in grades 7-12 during the 1994-1995 school year (Harris et al., 2009). Add Health has collected four waves of data. Wave I was collected in 1994-1995, Wave II in 1996, Wave III in 2001-2002, and Wave IV from 2008-2009. A parent of the respondent, usually the biological mother, also completed a questionnaire at Wave I, which

included questions about income, educational attainment, and marital relationships. This was the only wave in which parents were given a questionnaire.

Sample

My study uses data primarily from Waves I ($n = 20,745$) and IV ($n = 15,701$). At Wave I, respondents were in grades 7 through 12. At Wave IV, respondents were between ages 24 and 32. To be included in this study, respondents had to report having a married stepfather at Wave I and have valid sample weights ($n = 2,085$). Respondents with cohabiting stepfathers were excluded from analyses because Add Health does not include questions about stepfather-adolescent relationship quality for those with cohabiting stepfathers. About 22% of respondents were lost due to attrition ($n = 1,633$ at Wave IV). Additionally, respondents had to report having a current (heterosexual) romantic relationship at Wave IV. Respondents who reported being in a same-sex relationship, who were not in a current romantic relationship, who reported having multiple current romantic relationships, or who reported on a pregnancy were excluded from analyses. These restrictions resulted in a final sample of 1,257 respondents.

Measures

Dependent Variable

Romantic relationship quality was measured using seven items ($\alpha = .89$) at Wave IV: 1) “We enjoy doing even ordinary, day-to-day things together,” 2) “I am satisfied with the way we handle our problems and disagreements,” 3) “I am satisfied with the way we handle family finances,” 4) “My partner listens to me when I need someone to talk to,” 5) “My partner expresses love and affection to me,” 6) “I am satisfied with our sex life,” and 7) “I trust my partner to be faithful to me.” Response items were based on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly*

disagree, 5 = *strongly agree*). The means of these items were used to create a single romantic relationship quality variable. Descriptive statistics are found in Table 1.

Key Independent Variables

Mother-stepfather relationship quality was reported by the mother at Wave I and was measured using three items ($\alpha = .71$). These items were used to create a standardized scale, which had a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. The first item was, “On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 equals completely unhappy and 10 equals completely happy, how would you rate your relationship with your current spouse?” The second item was, “In the past year, have you and your current spouse talked to each other about separating?” (0 = *yes*, 1 = *no*). The third item was, “How much do you fight with your current spouse?” (1 = *a lot*, 4 = *not at all*).

Mother-adolescent relationship quality was measured using five items ($\alpha = .85$) at Wave I: 1) “How close do you feel to your mother?” (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*) 2) “How much do you think she cares about you?” (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*) 3) “Most of the time, your mother is warm and loving toward you” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). 4) “You are satisfied with the way you and your mother communicate with each other” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). 5) “Overall, you are satisfied with your relationship with your mother” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Items were then averaged to create a single relationship quality variable. *Stepfather-adolescent relationship quality* was measured at Wave I using a similar set of items ($\alpha = .92$) as those used for assessing mother-adolescent relationship quality.

Nonresident biological father-adolescent relationship quality was measured at Wave I. Respondents were asked, “How close do you feel to your biological father?” (1 = *not close at all*,

5 = *extremely close*). I recoded this variable so that scores ranging from 1 to 3 were considered “not close,” while scores of 4 and 5 were considered “close.” Respondents who reported that they did not know their biological fathers or that their biological fathers were dead were not asked about how close they felt to their fathers. Because I did not want to exclude these adolescents, I created dummy variables that corresponded to these three mutually exclusive groups: 1) close to biological father, 2) not close to biological father (omitted group), and 3) does not know biological father or he is dead.

ANALYTIC STRATEGY

I began by handling the issue of missing data using multiple imputation. With this method, data sets are imputed using the relationships of variables with no missing values. Each data set includes a new reasonable imputed value for the missing variable, which incorporates random variation (Rubin, 2004). When all of the data sets are complete, the parameter estimates are averaged across all data sets to yield a single point estimate. This method produces unbiased parameter estimates and standard errors. Though prior research has suggested performing 20 imputations (Johnson & Young, 2011), I performed 25 imputations to ensure more accurate estimates. The percent missing on imputed variables are depicted in Appendix B.

After missing data were handled, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses were used to examine bivariate relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variable. The key independent variables were mother-stepfather, mother-adolescent, stepfather-adolescent, and nonresident biological father-adolescent relationship quality, while all other variables were controls. After these bivariate analyses were conducted, multivariate analyses were carried out.

The survey data commands (SVY) in STATA (Stata Corp., 2005) were used to adjust the standard errors of the model estimates for the weighted, clustered, and stratified design of Add Health (Chantala & Tabor, 1999).

Control Variables

Duration of respondent's current romantic relationship at Wave IV is a continuous variable measured in years. *Type of union of offspring at Wave IV* is a set of dummy variables: married (omitted group), cohabiting, and dating. *Gender* of the adolescent is a dummy variable (0 = male, 1 = female). *Race* of the adolescent is included as a set of dummy variables: White (omitted group), Black, Hispanic, and other race. *Number of years in stepfamily at Wave I* is a continuous variable, ranging from 0 years to 20 years. *Mother's education* is measured at Wave I as a set of dummy variables: less than high school (omitted group), high school diploma or GED, some college, and Bachelor's degree or higher. If mothers were missing on this variable, then the adolescent's report of mother's education was substituted. *Mother and stepfather separated by Wave III* is included as a dummy variable: (0 = separated by Wave III, 1 = still together at Wave III). *Number of marriages and marriage-like relationships mothers had in the past 18 years* is a count variable which was reported by the mother at Wave I. *Logged income* is measured as a continuous variable and was obtained from the parent interview at Wave I. The log transformation of income was performed to reduce skewness.

RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, most respondents reported high quality relationships with their romantic partners ($\bar{x} = 4.14$). Most adolescents were close to their mothers ($\bar{x} = 4.41$) and stepfathers ($\bar{x} = 3.87$), though adolescents tended to report higher quality relationships with mothers than stepfathers. However, a different story emerged for nonresident biological fathers.

About 44% of adolescents reported not being close to their nonresident biological fathers, while less than one-third reported being close to their nonresident biological fathers. About 25% of adolescents reported that their biological fathers were dead or that they did not know them.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics for variables of interest.*

	Mean(SE)/Percentage
Romantic relationship quality at Wave IV	4.14 (.03)
Family Relationships at Wave I	
Mother-stepfather relationship quality (std)	0.00 (1.00*)
Happy with relationship	8.51 (.06)
Not talked about separation in past year	81.32
Frequency of fights with partner	2.82 (.03)
Mother-adolescent relationship quality	4.41 (.03)
Stepfather-adolescent relationship quality	3.87 (.04)
Nonresident biological father-adolescent closeness	
Close to biological father	30.49
Not close to biological father	44.02
Does not know biological father or he is dead	25.49
Type of Union of Offspring at Wave IV	
Married	50.92
Cohabiting	28.18
Dating	20.90
Duration of offspring romantic relationship (in years)	5.07 (.17)
Adolescent Characteristics at Wave I	
Female	53.91
Race	
White	72.57
Black	11.38
Hispanic	10.68
Other race	5.36
Years in stepfamily	6.92
Parent Characteristics	
Parents separated by Wave III	21.05
Mother's prior relationships	2.13
Mother's education	
Less than high school	14.74
High school	34.82
Some college	32.91
Bachelor's degree or higher	17.53
Logged income	3.65 (.04)

Based on weighted, unimputed data.

*Standard deviation rather than standard error.

Table 2 contains results for the bivariate model. In the bivariate model, I individually examined the effect of each independent variable on romantic relationship quality. Mother-stepfather relationship quality ($b = .17, p < .001$), mother-adolescent relationship quality ($b = .15, p < .01$), and stepfather-adolescent relationship quality ($b = .09, p < .05$) were all positively associated with offspring romantic relationship quality in young adulthood. Nonresident father-adolescent relationship quality approached significance ($b = .12, p < .10$).

Table 2. *Bivariate results of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses predicting romantic relationship quality at Wave IV.*

	Bivariate	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Mother-stepfather relationship quality (std)	.17***	.04
Mother-adolescent relationship quality	.15**	.05
Stepfather-adolescent relationship quality	.09*	.04
Close to biological father ^a	.12 ⁺	.06
Does not know biological father or he is dead	.10	.07
Type of union of offspring ^b		
Cohabiting	-.11 ⁺	.06
Dating	-.20*	.10
Duration of offspring romantic relationship (in years)	-.01	.01
Female	-.05	.06
Race ^c		
Black	-.38***	.09
Hispanic	-.09	.10
Other race	.00	.13
Logged income	.10*	.04
Years in stepfamily at Wave I	-.00	.01
Parents separated by Wave III	-.19*	.08
Mother's prior relationships	-.03	.04
Mother's education ^d		
High school	.29**	.10
Some college	.24*	.10
Bachelor's degree or higher	.39***	.11

Note. ^aOmitted reference group is not close to biological father, ^bOmitted reference group is married, ^cOmitted reference group is White, ^dOmitted reference group is less than high school. Results based on weighted, imputed data.

$N = 1,257$, *** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ + $p < .10$

Table 3 contains the results of the multivariate analyses. Model 1 includes the quality of all parent-adolescent relationships. The association between mother-adolescent relationship quality and romantic relationship quality was marginally significant ($b = .11, p = .05$). Additionally, the association between nonresident biological father adolescent relationship quality and romantic relationship quality approached significance for those who were close to their biological fathers ($b = .11, p < .10$). Although stepfather-adolescent relationship quality was significant in the bivariate model, it was reduced to non-significance when other relationships were added to the model. To examine which relationship caused the stepfather-adolescent relationship to be reduced to non-significance in the multivariate model, I added mother-stepfather and mother-adolescent relationship quality separately to the model, and discovered that it was the quality of the mother-adolescent relationship that completely took away the effect of the stepfather-adolescent relationship. This is likely due to mother-adolescent relationship quality and stepfather-adolescent relationship quality being moderately correlated ($r = .41$).

Model 2 contains the quality of parent-adolescent relationships, as well as offspring romantic relationship controls (e.g., type of union of offspring, and duration of offspring's current romantic relationship). When these controls were added to the model, mother-adolescent relationship quality became statistically significant ($b = .11, p < .05$). Being close to the biological father remained marginally significant ($b = .11, p < .10$). Furthermore, the type of union offspring were in affected their romantic relationship quality. Compared to married respondents, those who were in cohabiting ($b = -.18, p < .05$) and dating ($b = -.33, p < .01$) relationships reported lower quality romantic relationships. Duration of the offspring's romantic relationship was also significantly associated with their romantic relationship quality, such that

respondents who were in their romantic relationships for a longer period reported lower quality romantic relationships ($b = -.02, p < .05$).

Model 3 includes the mother-stepfather relationship, all parent-child relationships, offspring romantic relationship controls, demographic controls (e.g., gender and race), and logged income at Wave I. Results indicate that higher quality mother-stepfather relationships are significantly associated with offspring having higher quality romantic relationships ($b = .15, p < .01$). Mother-adolescent relationship quality is also positively associated with offspring romantic relationship quality ($b = .12, p < .05$). Compared to respondents who were married, those who were cohabiting ($b = -.15, p < .05$) or dating ($b = -.24, p < .05$) reported lower quality romantic relationships. Duration of current romantic relationship was negatively associated with romantic relationship quality ($b = -.02, p < .05$). Compared to White respondents, Black respondents reported lower quality romantic relationships ($b = -.30, p < .01$). Finally, the association between logged income at Wave I and offspring romantic relationship quality was marginally significant ($b = .06, p < .10$).

In the final model, all independent variables are included. Mother-stepfather relationship was positively associated with offspring romantic relationship quality ($b = .14, p < .01$). Mother-adolescent relationship quality was also positively associated with offspring romantic relationship quality ($b = .12, p < .05$). Respondents in dating relationships ($b = -.24, p < .05$) reported lower quality romantic relationships than married respondents. When all other controls were added to the model, the association between being in a cohabiting relationship and romantic relationship quality became marginally significant ($b = -.13, p < .10$). Duration of respondent's current romantic relationship was associated with lower quality romantic relationships ($b = -.02, p < .05$). Compared to White respondents, Black respondents

reported lower quality romantic relationships ($b = -.32, p < .01$). Mother's education was also associated with romantic relationship quality. Compared to those whose mothers had less than a high school diploma, respondents whose mothers had a high school diploma ($b = .26, p < .05$) or a Bachelor's degree or higher ($b = .37, p < .01$) reported higher quality romantic relationships.

Table 3. *Multivariate results of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses predicting romantic relationship quality at Wave IV.*

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Mother-stepfather relationship quality (std)					.15**	.05	.14**	.05
Mother-adolescent relationship quality	.11 ⁺	.06	.11*	.05	.12*	.06	.12*	.06
Stepfather-adolescent relationship quality	.06	.04	.05	.04	.03	.04	.03	.04
Close to biological father ^a	.11 ⁺	.06	.11 ⁺	.06	.10	.06	.10 ⁺	.06
Does not know biological father or he is dead	.07	.07	.08	.07	.10	.07	.10	.07
Type of union ^b								
Cohabiting			-.18*	.07	-.15*	.07	-.13 ⁺	.07
Dating			-.33**	.12	-.24*	.11	-.24*	.11
Duration of offspring romantic relationship (in years)			-.02*	.01	-.02*	.01	-.02*	.01
Female					-.01	.06	-.02	.06
Race ^c								
Black					-.30**	.10	-.32**	.10
Hispanic					-.05	.09	.01	.10
Other race					.04	.12	.06	.11
Logged income					.06 ⁺	.04	.01	.04
Years in stepfamily							.00	.01
Parents separated by Wave III							-.12	.09
Mother's prior relationships							-.05	.04
Mother's education ^d								
High school							.26*	.10
Some college							.18 ⁺	.10
Bachelor's degree or higher							.37**	.12

Note. ^aOmitted reference group is not close to biological father, ^bOmitted reference group is married, ^cOmitted reference group is White, ^dOmitted reference group is less than high school.

Results based on weighted, imputed data.

N = 1,257, **p < .001 *p < .01 ⁺p < .05 ⁺p < .10

DISCUSSION

Previous research has extensively explored between-group differences in the romantic relationship outcomes of children living in high and low conflict families, as well as children living in different family structures. However, there is almost no research that investigates within-group differences in romantic relationship quality of children in stepfamilies. Therefore, almost nothing was known about how adolescents with married stepfathers fared in terms of their romantic relationship quality in young adulthood, and little was known about which family relationships were most consequential for offspring romantic relationships. Given the growing complexity of families today, as well as the number of parents in the lives of children residing in stepfamilies, an investigation of the romantic relationships of children residing in married stepfamilies was particularly warranted. This study added to the literature by considering how youth in stepfamilies fare regarding romantic relationship quality, and considered not just the role of stepfathers, but considered the role of nonresident biological fathers, as well.

Most mothers reported high-quality relationships with their spouses, as illustrated by the histogram in Appendix A. Regarding the parent-child relationship, adolescents were generally close to both mothers and stepfathers, though they reported better relationship quality with mothers than with stepfathers. The finding that adolescents are closer to their mothers than stepfathers is not surprising and is consistent with previous research (King, 2006). Additionally, prior research has found that when adolescents are close to their mothers prior to the entrance of a married stepfather into the household, they are more likely to report being close to a married stepfather (King, 2009; King, Amato, & Lindstrom, 2015). Thus, close relationships with mothers may promote close relationships to stepfathers, as well. Although most adolescents

tended to report close ties to their mothers, their relationships with their nonresident biological fathers were not as strong.

Regarding the multivariate analyses, results provide support for both social learning and attachment theories. Mother-stepfather relationship quality was positively associated with romantic relationship quality. This finding supports social learning theory, and is consistent with prior research that has found that mother-stepfather relationship quality is positively associated with offspring romantic relationship quality in young adulthood (Yu & Adler-Baeder, 2007). Additionally, higher quality relationships with mothers in adolescence were associated with higher quality romantic relationships in young adulthood. Adolescents' relationships with stepfathers were significant in the bivariate model, but the association was reduced to non-significance when mother-adolescent relationship quality was added to the model. Nonresidential biological father-adolescent relationship quality was also not significant in the full model. However, nonresidential biological father-adolescent relationship quality did approach significance in both the bivariate and full multivariate models.

These results indicate that the mother-stepfather and mother-adolescent relationships are most strongly associated with the quality of offspring romantic relationships in young adulthood. Even though the mother's relationship with the adolescent's nonresident biological father was not successful, which is an experience that has been found to undermine the quality of offspring romantic relationships, most mothers get another chance at having successful romantic relationships. When a stepfather enters the home, he and the adolescent's mother can model relationship behaviors that would foster successful romantic relationships to offspring, particularly if the mother-stepfather relationship is high-quality. Regarding the mother-adolescent relationship, the finding that mothers matter more for offspring romantic relationships

than stepfathers and nonresident biological fathers is probably due to mothers having been the most stable parental figures in these adolescents' lives. Stepfathers have not always been in the home, and nonresident biological fathers have left the home (assuming that they lived with their children at some point in time).

Although adolescence is a stage of life in which parents become less central and friends and romantic partners become more central, this study indicates that parents still play an important and far-reaching role in shaping the lives of their children, especially in regards to their romantic relationships. This study adds to the existing literature by going further than simply examining the effects of parental divorce on offspring romantic relationships. This study considers offspring with married stepfathers, and examines which family relationships during adolescence are most consequential for offspring romantic relationship quality in young adulthood, within the context of parental (re)marriage.

Of course, this study is not without limitations. One limitation is that romantic relationship quality (for both parents and offspring) was reported only by one partner in the dyad. Given that there are two partners in the relationship, assessing romantic relationship quality from one partner is insufficient, and may not give the most accurate picture about the overall climate of the relationship. There could be discrepancies in how each partner assesses the quality of their relationship, and unfortunately, I was not able to take this into account. Future research would benefit by considering the perceived relationship quality of both partners, as this would allow for a more complete assessment of romantic relationship quality.

Another limitation of this study is that those with cohabiting stepfathers were excluded from my sample because there were not any questions that measured stepfather-adolescent relationship quality for these respondents. However, it is important to note that marriages that

began as cohabitations were included in my sample. Nonetheless, because stepfathers who were cohabiting at Wave I were excluded, my sample may be more select, as those who marry are more likely to be White and less likely to be socioeconomically disadvantaged (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005; Raley, Sweeney, & Wondra, 2015). Additionally, although the majority of cohabiting relationships tend to be short-term (Bumpass & Lu, 2000), by either culminating in a marriage or the dissolution of the relationship, it still would have been better if I could have included adolescents with cohabiting stepfathers in my sample, as this may have provided additional insight. Given that cohabitation has become much more common over the past few decades, future research should examine the impact of cohabiting stepfathers on the quality of offspring romantic relationships, as well.

Regarding the measures, a limitation of this study is that my measure for nonresident biological father-adolescent relationship quality was less than ideal. Add Health only included one question to measure the quality of this relationship, so while I used multiple questions to measure mother-adolescent and stepfather-adolescent relationship quality, my measure for nonresident biological father-adolescent relationship quality was lacking considerably.

A final limitation is that I do not have detailed measures of parent-child relationship quality for all potential parents. For example, if an adolescent's biological parents have both remarried, then there are four parents in their lives (i.e., resident biological mother, stepfather, nonresident biological father, and stepmother). Unfortunately, this was not able to be taken into account because Add Health does not include comprehensive measures for parent-child relationship quality for nonresident parents. Despite these limitations, however, my study goes beyond prior research by incorporating stepfathers and nonresident biological fathers into the

literature regarding how the quality of parent-child relationships influence their children's romantic relationships later on in life.

This study highlights the important role that family of origin factors play in romantic relationships. The findings may be of benefit to family therapists and practitioners by providing insight into why some couples have higher-quality and more successful romantic relationships than other couples. Specifically, given that social learning and attachment theory received support, family practitioners could partner with extension educators at land-grant institutions to develop outreach programs that would aim to make the community more aware of how interparental and parent-child relationship quality could, for better or worse, impact the romantic relationship quality of their children.

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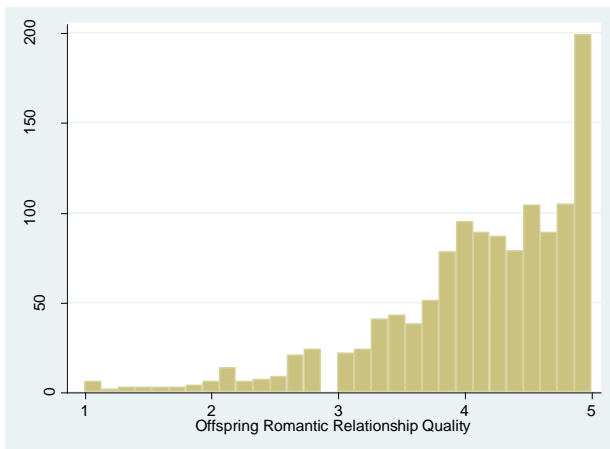
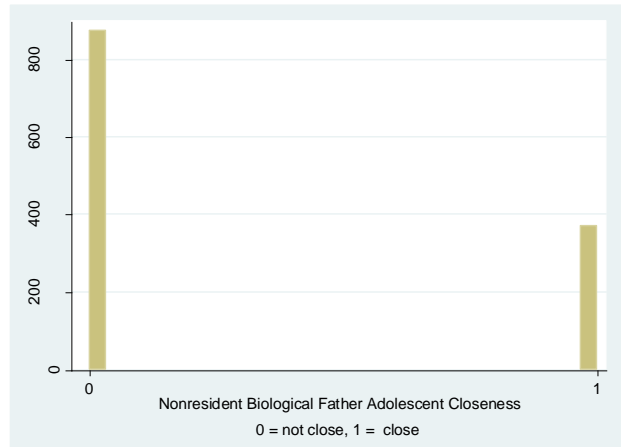
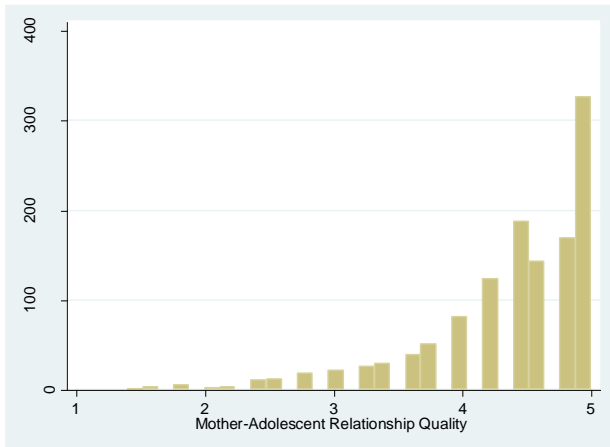
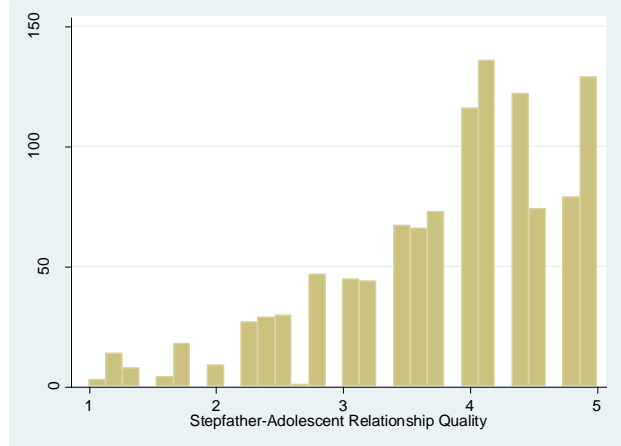
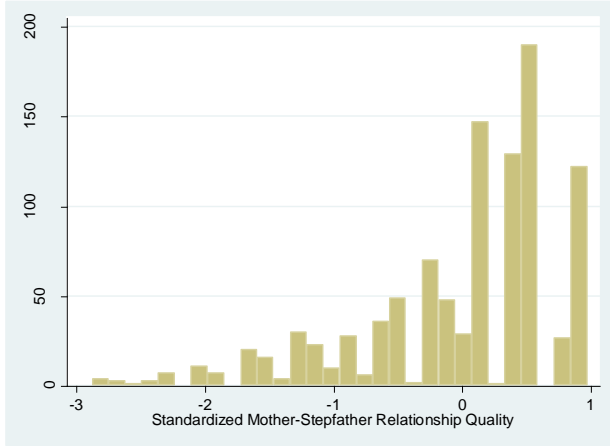
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APPENDIX A

Histograms of relationship quality variables.



APPENDIX B

Percent missing on imputed variables.

Offspring romantic relationship quality	<1.00%
Mother-stepfather relationship quality	18.62%
Stepfather-adolescent relationship quality	9.23%
Nonresident biological father-adolescent relationship quality	<1.00%
Duration of offspring romantic relationship (in years)	2.07%
Logged income	21.64%
Years in stepfamily	7.08%
Parents separated by Wave III	42.40%
Mother's prior relationships	14.56%
Mother's education	<1.00%