Article

People's Opinions and Stereotypes about Stepfamilies

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Abstract

The stepfamily represents an increasingly common form of the family structure. Numerous studies have nonetheless shown that people living in stepfamilies are often stigmatized. The present study focused on public opinion based on a representative sample ($N = 1,202$) regarding: (a) stepfamilies as a unit; (b) the current situation and future of children; (c) the rights and responsibilities of stepparents; and (d) the perception of stepparents as well as the stereotypes about them. The results showed that people had a favorable opinion about some dimensions, like the future of children living in stepfamilies, but an examination of stereotypes concerning stepfathers and perceptions about stepparents showed a more unfavorable opinion. A latent class analysis showed that there were three opinion profiles. Though there was a positive perception of several stepfamily dimensions, it can be seen that the opinions about stepfamilies were not monolithic. Moreover, the stereotype of the sexual abuser was always present.

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Introduction

Although couples can follow different couple and family trajectories on their way to founding a stepfamily, one constant remains: in many societies, the majority of these families are now formed by parents of children who have separated or who have never lived together. This situation contrasts with that which was common several decades ago, when stepfamilies were essentially founded following the death of a parent. In a few decades, we have gone from a social context where a low life expectancy gave rise to numerous remarriages to one in which a more liberal relationship for couples has led to a noticeable rise in divorces and, as a pointed out by Milan (2000), "a spectacular increase in the number of people who can remarry" (p. 10). Above and beyond the practice of remarriage, which is no longer as popular, the demographic statistics attest to the increasing numbers of couples. Indeed, nearly one in ten North American children now live in a stepfamily (Kreider & Ellis, 2011; Statistique Canada, 2012). In the United States, 65% of women aged 15–44 who are engaged in a second union have a child from a prior relationship (Guzzo, 2016). In Canada, stepfamilies represented 12.6% of all the families comprising a couple and children (Vézina, 2012). Different indicators show moreover that the tendency to form a new couple relationship after a separation or to start a stepfamily varies according to the country (e.g., Gałęzewska, Perelli-Harris, & Berrington, 2017), province (Statistique Canada, 2016), and the region or state (Kreider & Lofquist, 2014), thus indicating that family behaviors are influenced by factors such as culture, social context, and legislation.

Even though the social context has changed, Western society's view of stepfamilies was developed earlier along the lines of the aforementioned reasoning, that of the death of a child's parent and the "replacement" by the arrival of a stepparent. At the cultural and scientific level, stepfamilies and stepparents have been negatively regarded in folklore and literature (Noy, 1991; Wald, 1981) and through the development of a deficit-oriented view of family structures that deviate from the intact two-parent family model (Lefaucheur, 1987, 1993; Marotz-Baden, Adams, Bueche, Munro, & Munro, 1979; Martin, 1993), an observation that still seems to hold (Valiquette-Tessier, Vandette, & Gosselin, 2016). The rise of the divorce phenomenon seems to have consequently fostered social disapproval, which may also have influenced people's views of the ensuing family structures, including those of are changing, moving toward a greater acceptance (Esmer, 2007). That being said, other studies have pointed to considerable contrasts in people's opinions (Amato, 2014), and have suggested that the stigmatization tends to be moving from the fact of being divorced to that of not having custody of the children after separation (Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2016).

Does this trend and disparity lead to a change in people's views of stepfamilies, a family structure that frequently ensues from parental separation? Are the stereotypes and negative views observed in the past still present and, if so, are these widespread or divisive views? These questions have only been the subject of a limited number of recent studies, often with unrepresentative samples, even though the phenomenon appears to be evolving quickly. And although previous studies have generally examined a specific dimension, the present study has examined several different facets of stepfamilies.

It seems all the more interesting to examine this question in a cultural context like that of the Province of Quebec, which is known for its more liberal values in family matters. In the province, the majority of children are born to common-law parents (2nd in the world after Iceland), 4 out of 10 children will experience the separation of their parents before the age of 18, and nearly 1 child out of 3 lives with a stepparent at one time or another in their youth (Desrosiers, 2017). The large proportion of common-law unions can be explained by the fact that, like Americans, Canadians now accept common-law unions as a childless prelude to marriage. Quebeckers, however, have gone much farther by massively accepting this type of relationship as the basis for their family life (Le Bourdais, Lapierre-Adamcyk, & Pacaut, 2004). In the Québec context, the choice of this type of relationship does not necessarily denote less of a commitment to the other partner; rather, it is frequently a permanent situation. Relationship instability is nonetheless more frequent among common-law couples than among married couples (Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2008) and the former are more likely to live in a stepfamily. What is more, Québec parents move in with their new partner more quickly than do parents from other Canadian provinces (Juby, Marcil-Gratton, & Le Bourdais, 2005). In the United States as in Canada, couples who are in their second cohabitation relationship are more likely to be in a common-law union (Stewart, 2007; Teachman, 2008). It is consequently an unavoidable type of relationship in the study of family transitions. Moreover, in order to better take into account the family environments in which its children are growing up, Quebec is, like other states and countries, looking at modifying its family law, particularly with regard to the rights and duties of stepparents (Saint-Jacques, 2016; Goubau & Chabot, 2018). If the debate on this topic is to be better informed, it seems important to establish people's views on some of the dimensions specific to stepfamilies.

More specifically, this study addresses the following questions: What are people's positions regarding the various dimensions of stepfamilies? Is it possible to distinguish groups whose views about stepfamilies have certain similarities or, on the contrary, are different? If such is the case, what are the sociodemographic profiles of these subgroups?

Perception of Family Life and of Contemporary Family Changes

Different studies showed that more educated people and women generally had had a less conservative view of the family (Gubernskaya, 2010; Kinlaw, Gatins, & Dunlap, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2011; Treas, Lui, & Gubernskaya, 2014). Also, younger respondents and those having lived in diversified family contexts have a less conservative view of these issues (Kinlaw et al., 2015).

People's perceptions of stepfamilies have been more frequently explored through studies carried out with small samples, most often university students, and from the angle of the stigmatization of stepfamily members and of stereotypes about the stepparents' role (e.g., Claxton-Oldfield, Garber, & Gillcrist, 2006; Claxton-Oldfield, O'Neill, Thomson, & Gallant, 2006; Planitz & Fenney, 2009; Troilo & Coleman, 2008).

The Stepfamily as a Unit

Studies detected little difference in how people perceive stepfamilies as compared to intact families, suggesting that the stigma is carried more by individual members (stepparent, stepchild) than by the family unit as a whole (Claxton-Oldfield, 2008; Ganong & Coleman, 1997a). Nonetheless, though the differences in perception remain modest, some studies have shown that stepfamilies are more often described using negative adjectives and are perceived as being more conflictual and less stable than are intact families (Claxton-Oldfield & O'Neil, 2007; Ganong & Coleman, 1997b; Planitz & Feeney, 2009). Despite the increasing diversification in family structures and forms, some authors (Ganong & Coleman, 2017) consider that the ideology of the nuclear family is still quite present and that stepfamilies are still seen as an incomplete institution (Cherlin, 1978) or as a deviant or deficient family form (Ganong & Coleman, 1997b).

The Current Situation and Future of the Children

In the British Social Attitudes, the majority of people (78%) believe that stepfamilies "probably" or "definitely" provide a framework for children's development that is just as adequate as that provided by intact families (Duncan & Phillips, 2008). Being a parent or stepparent did not significantly influence the answer to this question. Young people agreed, on average, that having a stepparent is difficult for most and disagreed with the statement that stepparents make children happy (Kinlaw et al., 2015). No significant effects for age, gender, or the parent's marital status were noted.

Several studies have indicated that children who grow up in stepfamilies are seen more negatively by others: they are thought to be more unstable, more dissatisfied, and more insecure than children in intact two-parent families, as well as being more neglected and less loved. This negative view would seem to be shared by professionals likely to frequent or meet these young people (teachers, nurses, psychologists, and social workers) (Claxton-Oldfield, 2008; Coleman & Ganong, 1987; Ganong & Coleman, 1997a). That being said, a greater number of years of experience tended to reduce these professionals' prejudice (Bryan, Ganong, Coleman, & Bryan, 1985) and the increased difficulties of children from stepfamilies were not perceived in all areas of their lives, like school performance (Claxton-Oldfield & Kavanagh, 1999; Guttman & Broudo, 1989).

Rights and Responsibilities of Stepparents

A survey (Dey & Wassof, 2006; Wassof & Martin, 2005) carried out in Scotland in 2004 looked at people's opinions about the stepparent role, and in particular the financial involvement of stepparents and their rights of access to their partner's children after a possible separation of the stepcouple. In the situation presented by the surveyors in which the children live primarily with their remarried mother, two-thirds of the people felt that the income of the children's stepfather should be taken into account when calculating the support given by the noncustodial father and the educational loans and grants for the child. However, in the fictitious situation of a 12-year-old child who has lived 5 years with a stepfather who treated him/her like his own child while the stepfamily was together, 64% of the respondents were of the opinion that the stepfather's financial responsibility toward the child should cease when the stepcouple separated. In both of these issues, men were more in favor of the stepfather's financial responsibility (during and after the relationship) than were the women. Even though the majority of Scots felt that the stepfather's financial responsibility should not continue after separation, the same is not true for his parental responsibility in the social sense, whereas 77% of respondents believed that the stepfather should be given the same possibility of access to the child as has a biological father in such a situation (Dey & Wassof, 2006).

Perception about Stepparents and Stereotypes

Many studies have shown that, when presented in a neutral context, stepfathers and stepmothers are perceived more negatively than are biological parents; in particular, stepparents are perceived to be less loving, less in control,

and less successful in terms of parenting (Claxton-Oldfield, 2008; Claxton-Oldfield et al., 2005; Ganong, Coleman & Mapes, 1990; Ganong & Coleman, 1997a; Planitz & Feeney, 2009; Troilo & Coleman, 2008). Nonetheless, this negative perception of stepparents might only arise in certain situations, particularly those with a negative connotation (e.g., when a child throws a tantrum), whereas a scenario with a positive connotation did not lead to different perceptions about fathers and stepfathers (Claxton-Oldfield, 1992). In the same vein, the stereotype of the "sexually abusive stepfather" was sometimes activated by an ambiguous scenario suggesting a risk of sexual abuse, whereas the same scenario applied to a biological father did not raise as much suspicion (Claxton-Oldfield, Goodyear, Parsons, & Claxton-Oldfield, 2002). In the same study, however, a second scenario where a father or stepfather could be perceived as having physically abused a child did not produce this difference in perception, suggesting that the stereotype of the sexual abuser is one of the stereotypes associated with stepfathers, whereas that of the physical abuser is not (Claxton-Oldfield et al., 2002). In fact, the various stereotypes about stepfathers that were identified were more often positive than negative (Claxton-Oldfield et al., 2005). In addition, although stepfathers were generally perceived less positively than fathers were, they were nonetheless seen, compared to other types of fathers (married, adoptive, divorced, and gay) as the most hardworking. They were, moreover, perceived positively in all the breadwinning items (Troilo & Coleman, 2008). These nuanced results correspond to those coming from studies that have examined the viewpoint of young people living in stepfamilies. The negative stereotypes do not seem to influence the way they see their family life and they have a more subtle view of the advantages and disadvantages of having a stepparent (Claxton-Oldfield et al., 2006; Saint-Jacques & Chamberland, 2000).

Stepfamilies as a Global Phenomenon

The literature on people's and groups' opinions about stepfamilies indicates that different dimensions of this phenomenon have been taken into account, namely, (a) the structure of these families; (b) the rights, responsibilities, and practices of parents and stepparents (which may or may not be institutionalized); (c) the well-being of the children who live in these families; (d) perceptions about stepparents; and (e) society's stereotypes about stepparents. Few studies, however, have taken all these dimensions into account simultaneously in an overall attempt to explain what constitutes society's current views regarding stepfamilies. That being said, this overview is important because, as was shown in the systematic review by Valiquette-Tessier et al. (2016) about stereotypes and parenthood, taking into account a single dimension

gives an incomplete portrait which might even be quite different when other dimensions are considered.

Based on this conceptualization, we hypothesized that society's view of stepfamilies stretches over a continuum of opinions, ranging from very favorable to very unfavorable. More specifically, we expect that (a) groups based on similar sets of opinions can be established within the overall population and placed on this continuum; and (b) these groupings can be associated with a particular respondent profile. Based on the literature reviewed (Gubernskaya, 2010; Kinlaw et al., 2015; Pew Research Center, 2011), we also hypothesized that characteristics usually associated with a more liberal view (e.g., being a woman, being younger, having experienced family diversity, having attained a higher level of education) or conservative view of the family (being a man, being older, always having lived in a two-biological-parent family, having a lower level of education) are, respectively, those associated with a more positive or negative view of stepfamilies.

Methodology

Population and Sample

The surveyed population was composed of Quebeckers 18 years old and over who could speak French or English and who participated in a web panel comprising 200,000 people. Surveys using a web panel have several advantages, such as being easy to run and, from an administrative point of view, quick and inexpensive (Svensson, 2014). The names of 6,000 participants on this panel were randomly drawn and 1,202 of them agreed to fill out the survey (20% acceptance rate). Our sample consisted of 701 (58.3%) men and 501 women (41.7%) with a good representation of different levels of education (elementary/high school: 28%; community college: 30.2%; university: 40.8%). The overrepresentation of men, which is not very common in social science research, is difficult to explain. A systematic review by Fan & Yan (2010) revealed that different possible factors might have influenced the response rates of the web survey. Among these factors were the respondents' Internet resources, computer literacy, and certain sociodemographic characteristics, including age but not gender (Couper, Kapteyn, Schonlau, & Winter, 2007). The majority (34.7%) reported a household income between $40,000 and $99,000. Respondents were married (35.9%), single (28.5%), in common-law union (22.6%), or widowed (2.8%). In their infancy, 28.6% of the sample had experienced parental separation and, among them, 57.6% lived with parent's new partner. One respondent out of four has been separated or divorced (28.6%) and, among these, more than two-thirds lived in a stepfamily (Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents' Relationship and Family Characteristics ($N = 1,202$).

Characteristics	Unweighted data[1] % (N)	Weighted data[2] % (N)
Relationship status		
Married	35.9 (431)	35.4 (425)
Divorced	9.7 (116)	9.8 (117)
Widowed	2.8 (34)	3.4 (40)
Single	28.5 (342)	27.9 (336)
Common-law	22.6 (272)	22.9 (276)
Child(ren) living in household	32.9 (396)	29.4 (354)
Two-biological-parent family	69.9 (277)	69.5 (246)
Single-parent family	13.1 (52)	14.1 (50)
Stepfamily	15.2 (60)	15.0 (53)
Have been separated or divorced	28.6 (344)	28.6 (343)
Lived together with a new partner	68.3 (235)	67.9 (233)
Relationship with new partner involving one or more children (stepfamily)	61.7 (145)	57.5 (134)
Parents separated or divorced before age 18	19.8 (238)	21.3 (256)
Lived with parent's new partner	57.6 (137)	58.6 (150)

Note. The sum of the percentages for each characteristic does not necessarily add up to 100% due to the rounding of numbers.
[1]Data correspond to the actual number of respondents reached by the survey.
[2]Data take sample weights into account.

Questions and Procedures

Five dimensions of people's opinions about stepfamilies were measured using the online questionnaire.

Opinions about Stepfamilies as a Unit. The first question aimed to compare the respondents' views of so-called traditional families with their most common alternatives (stepfamilies and single-parent families). The term "traditional family" was used with respondents because this is how society refers to two-biological-parent families. As the traditional character of these families is debatable from an historical point of view, we instead use—when it is appropriate due to its current usage in family studies—the aforementioned term, two-biological-parent family. The respondents had to note their level of agreement with one item "the traditional family is ideal whereas step- and single-parent families have less value." The score for this question varied

from −3 (*strongly disagree*) to +3 (*strongly agree*). The respondents were then asked to choose up to three characteristics from a choice of eight descriptors to separately qualify: (a) traditional families, (b) single-parent families, and (c) stepfamilies. Of these eight descriptors, four had a positive connotation (happy, normal, stable, and reassuring) and four had a negative connotation (conflictual, complex, stressful, and dysfunctional). In addition, an overall score for opinions about stepfamilies as a unit was constructed by calculating the mean for the scores on two questions: one on the value of traditional families versus single-parent and stepfamilies, and another on the positive or negative characteristics associated with stepfamilies only (the score was calculated by subtracting the number of positive characteristics from the number of negative characteristics chosen, min. −3, max. +3).

Opinions about children's future. The respondents had to indicate their level of agreement with an item: "Children who grow up in a stepfamily are as likely to thrive and be happy as those who grow up in a traditional family." The scores for this question varied from −3 (*strongly disagree*) to +3 (*strongly agree*).

Opinions about the rights and responsibilities of stepparents. People's opinions about this issue were measured with a series of five questions with yes/no answers looking to see whether or not stepparents who take care of their partner's children on a daily basis have rights:

> 1) to get the child's report card, 2) to authorize a school outing for the child, 3) to consult a doctor for a minor health problem affecting the child, 4) to authorize a major medical operation on the child, 5) to cancel a school trip if the child misbehaves.

The respondents then had to rate their level of agreement with three statements: (a) if a stepparent lives with the child of his or her partner for more than a year, he or she should provide for the child's financial needs, (b) in the event of a separation, a stepparent who has spent a significant amount of time with the child of his or her partner should have visitation rights, (c) let's imagine that the law is amended and it becomes possible for a child to have more than two parents. In that context, a stepparent should be able to adopt his or her stepchild if he or she is the person who takes care of the child most of the time. The overall score for their opinion on the rights and responsibilities of stepparents was calculated by adding up the scores for each question, the minimum total score being 0 (when answering *no, strongly disagree* to all questions) and the maximum total score being 8 (when answering *yes, strongly agree* to all questions).

Perception about stepparents. The perception about stepparents was measured using a free association task where respondents had to name up to two words that came to mind about the words "stepfather" and "stepmother." The answers were then coded as being positive, neutral, or negative. The scores for these two questions were combined, their range going from −4 (two negative responses for "stepmother" and "stepfather") to +4 (two positive responses for "stepmother" and "stepfather").

Negative stereotypes associated with stepfathers. A stereotype consists in "psychological representations of the characteristics of people that belong to particular groups" (McGarty, Yzerbyt, & Spears, 2002, p. 2). Stereotypes take the form of stable mental clichés that lead to biases in our view about a given group through extreme simplification, overgeneralization, and systematic, rigid use (Mannoni, 2011). They are shared group beliefs (McGarty et al., 2002) about another group that can be positive or negative. The presence of a stereotype about abusive stepfathers was measured using an adaptation of two vignettes developed by Claxton-Oldfield et al. (2002), in which a father or stepfather was described as doing certain things that might suggest sexual abuse (first vignette) and physical abuse (second vignette). The respondents were randomly divided into two groups. The first group ($N = 602$) responded to a vignette that was presented as a stepfather's actions and the other half ($N = 600$) responded to the same vignette presented as a father's actions. The respondents were given a choice of responses to indicate their level of suspicion regarding the father's/stepfather's behavior (four-point Likert scale ranging from *very suspicious* to *not suspicious at all*). The overall score for negative stereotypes associated with stepfathers was calculated with the mean of the answers to the two vignettes for the stepfathers only (min. = 1, max. = 4).

The respondents were allowed to answer the questionnaire in French or in English. The order in which these questions were presented was rotated so as to avoid an order-related bias. A set of questions allowed us to gather standard socioeconomic and family characteristics.

Analysis

In order to answer the first question of our research—which was intended to paint a portrait of Quebecers' opinions about various aspects of stepfamilies—descriptive analyses (percentages, means) are first presented. Some of these analyses looked at a group of indicators and were based on the total score for each dimension. Latent class mixture modeling (Collins & Lanza, 2011) was then conducted using Mplus software, version 7 (L. K. Muthén & B. O.

Muthén, 2012) so as to identify distinct subgroups, each one composed of respondents who reported similar patterns of responses in their opinions about stepfamilies. This analysis allowed us to address the second research question, which aimed to verify whether subgroups (or classes) shared similarities in their views on stepfamilies. These classes were then described and compared for the sociodemographic variables using chi-squared tests to establish their particularities. These latter analyses in turn allowed us to address the third research question by establishing the sociodemographic profile of the various classes.

The inferential analyses (contingency tables and latent class analysis) were weighted using sampling weights which were: (a) normalized so the sum of the weights equaled the sample size; and (b) poststratified from Statistics Canada's latest census data according to sex, age, Quebec's administrative regions, mother tongue, and the presence of minor children in the household. It should be noted that the regions of Montréal and Québec City, the two largest urban centers in the Province of Québec, contrasted in the analyses with all the other regions in the province, which are less densely populated. As for the level of education, it was adjusted based on data collected through the data gathering firm's telephone omnibus surveys.

Results

Stepfamilies as a Unit and the Situation of the Children who Grow up in Stepfamilies

A minority of respondents (39%) said that step- and single-parent families were of less value than were two-biological-parent families. Two-biological-parent families were mainly described with positive descriptors (e.g., normal, stable, and reassuring were descriptors employed by more than 50% of respondents), whereas negative characteristics were more often associated with single-parent families (stressful, according to 56.1% of respondents) and stepfamilies (conflictual, according to 34% of respondents). Moreover, step- and single-parent families were described as being more similar than were stepfamilies and two-biological-parent families. Furthermore, stepfamilies were seen as being more complex than were single-parent families, which were seen as being more stressful. Despite the results indicating that two-biological-parent families were, on the whole, more positively perceived by the respondents, a large majority of them (76%) believed that children who grow up in a stepfamily are as likely to thrive and be happy as those who grow up in a traditional family.

Stepparents' Rights and Responsibilities

The vast majority of respondents believed that a stepparent who takes care of his or her partner's child on a daily basis should be able to consult a doctor for a minor health problem affecting the child (87.4%), to receive the child's report card (73.3%), and to authorize a school outing for the child (71.5%). Two other statements garnered a smaller number of respondents. A small majority (53.1%) felt that a stepparent should be able to cancel a school trip if the child misbehaves and a minority (31.1%) considered that a stepparent should be able to authorize a major medical operation on the child.

Furthermore, 65.8% of the people agreed with giving visitation rights to a stepparent who has spent a significant amount of time with the child. Half of the respondents (51.3%) believed that a stepparent should be able to adopt his or her stepchild if he or she is the person who takes care of the child most of the time (in a hypothetical legal context where it becomes possible for a child to have more than two parents). As regards responsibilities, a bit less than half of the respondents (45.3%) thought that a stepparent who lives with the child of his or her partner for more than a year should provide for the child's financial needs.

The Perception about Stepparents and the Stereotypes Associated with Stepfathers

Some 30% of the respondents used at least one negative qualifier to describe stepfathers (e.g., abuse, harsh, rivalry) versus 35.5% for stepmothers (e.g., interfering, conflicts, mean). The respondents (21.8%) used at least one positive qualifier for the stepfathers (e.g., helpful, kindness, protective). An almost equivalent proportion (21.1%) used at least one positive term for the stepmothers (e.g., complicity, loving, generous) or chose at least one neutral term (21.5% versus 21.2%), such as "another male figure" or "the father's lover." That being said, we observed that stepparents were attributed two negative qualifiers (7.8% for the stepfathers and 11.3% for the stepmothers) more often than they were given two positive qualifiers (4.9% for the stepfathers and 6% for the stepmothers) and that this contrast was even more distinct for stepmothers. Few of the respondents chose contrasting terms pointing to both a positive and negative qualifier (3.8% for the stepfathers and 4.3% for the stepmothers), a single neutral qualifier without any other choice (13.7% for the stepfathers and 14.3% for the stepmothers) or two neutral qualifiers (2% for the stepfathers and 1.4% for the stepmothers). It is noteworthy that this question led to a high proportion of
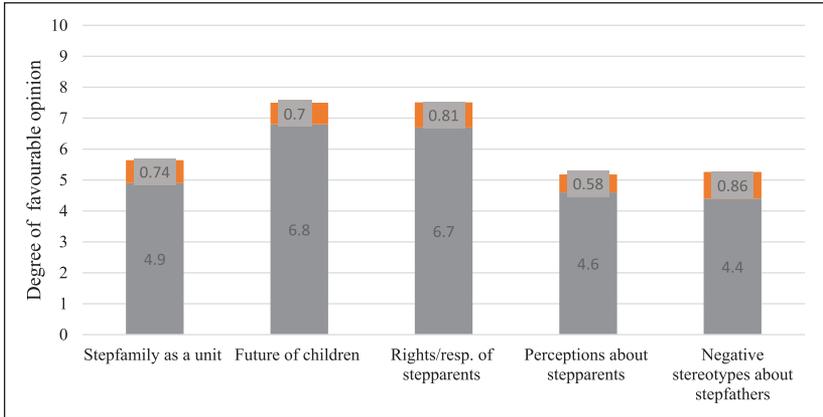
Figure 1. Degree of favorability regarding the various stepfamily dimensions.

respondents who did not answer (36.5% for the stepfathers and 32.1% for the stepmothers).

Moreover, the responses to vignettes suggesting sexual or physical abuse showed that certain contexts pointed to stereotypes about stepfathers. In a short vignette that might suggest sexual abuse, the results showed that more respondents found the stepfathers' behavior to be *very suspicious* or *somewhat suspicious* as compared to the same behavior by the father (63.0% versus 43.3% of respondents). The comparison between the fathers and stepfathers was statistically significant ($\chi^2(3) = 56.09$, $p < .001$).

In the second scenario, that might suggest physical abuse, the portrait was different. The suspicion about the stepfathers (51.9%) and fathers (51.2%) was almost identical.

Opinions about Stepfamilies

In order to compare people's opinions about the different stepfamily components, a common denominator was applied to the means obtained in the five dimensions, with 0 indicating a very unfavorable opinion and 10, a very favorable one (Figure 1). This analysis showed that people had, on average, a favorable view of stepfamilies, with scores varying from 4.4 to 6.8. The dimension that obtained the highest favorability score was the future of the children (6.8), followed closely by increasing the number of the rights and responsibilities of stepparents (6.7). The dimension that obtained the lowest favorability score was the stereotypes about stepfathers (4.4), followed closely by perceptions about stepparents (4.6).

Table 2. Statistical Indices for Choosing the Number of Classes.

#Class	df	Log-likelihood	BIC	Entropy
1	10	−9,698.4	19,467.7	1.00
2	16	−9,560.7	19,234.8	0.575
3	**22**	−8,797.8	**17,751.6**	**0.954**
4	28	**−8,784.5**	17,767.7	0.935

Note. The index value indicating the best adjustment is shown in bold. The parsimony criteria (BIC) and class separation (entropy) were used to choose the final number of classes.

Results of Latent Class Analysis

The goal of the second research question was to determine whether people's view of stepfamilies was homogeneous in the population or whether, on the contrary, distinct subgroups could be identified. It was the latter that was confirmed because we were able to form subgroups (classes) using latent class analysis. Models ranging from one to four classes were studied for the five stepfamily dimensions. The indices presented in Table 2 suggest that a three-class solution is optimal.

The results of the weighted analysis, based on the three latent classes, are presented in Table 3. The first class, whose proportion in the population is estimated by the model at nearly 18.6% ($N = 223$), comprised the respondents who had, out of the three classes, the most negative view of stepfamilies. The second class, the largest of the sample at 56.7% ($N = 681$), consisted of respondents with a mixed opinion; the third class, at 24.8% ($N = 298$), was the most positive. Two dimensions out of five significantly distinguished these three classes, namely, "stepfamilies as a unit" and "the future of the children." As for the dimension "perception about stepparents," it did not distinguish the negative class from the intermediate class, though there was a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the positive class and those of the negative and intermediate class for this dimension. As for the two other dimensions, "rights and responsibilities of stepparents" and "negative stereotypes associated with stepfathers," the means of the three classes were more homogeneous, which indicates that these dimensions did not significantly contribute to the shaping of the three classes.

Sociodemographic Profile of Classes

In order to answer the final research question on the profile of subgroups with similar views about stepfamilies, the three classes were compared on the basis of sociodemographic variables. First of all, the class showing the most

Table 3. Description and Comparison of the Three Latent Classes Based on the Five Dimensions of the Views about Stepfamilies ($N = 1,202$).

Dimensions	C1 $N = 223$ Negative position	C2 $N = 681$ Intermediary position	C3 $N = 298$ Positive position	F	R^2 (%)
1. The stepfamily as a unit (min. −3, max. +3)	−1.15[a]	−0.09[b]	0.95[c]	152.18***	20.2
2. The future of the children (min. −3, max. +3)	−1.21[a]	1.00[b]	3.00[c]	152.88***	20.4
3. Rights and responsibilities of the stepparents (min. 0, max. 8)	5.09	5.42	5.45	2.15 $p =.12$	0.4
4. Words associated with stepparents (min. −4, max. +4)	−0.57[a]	−0.38[a]	0.06[b]	11.57***	1.9
5. Negative stereotypes associated with stepfathers (min. 1, max. 4)	2.24	2.30	2.41	2.40 $p = .09$	0.8

Note. *** $= p <.001$.

negative opinions toward stepfamilies (class 1) comprised a significantly higher proportion of men (56.6%) than did class 2 (48.5%) and class 3 (42.8%) ($\chi^2(2) = 9.64$, p =.008). Class 3 likewise comprised more younger respondents (18–34-year-olds), whereas class 1 comprised proportionately more 35–54-year-olds and class 2 (intermediary) more respondents 55 and over ($\chi^2(4) = 28.14$, p <.001). Results for occupation were consistent with these age-based differences: retired people were more numerous in the intermediary class, whereas students were more numerous in the positive class. Even though they represented a small percentage of the sample, those who stayed at home were also proportionately more numerous in the positive class ($\chi^2(8) = 23.39$, p =.003). Finally, French-speaking respondents were underrepresented in the negative class ($\chi^2(2) = 6.75$, p = .03).

There were likewise differences between classes with respect to current and past family experiences. Respondents who had separated or were divorced were overrepresented in the intermediary and positive classes and underrepresented in the negative class ($\chi^2(2) = 17.13$, p < .001). Respondents

living in two-biological-parent families were likewise proportionately less numerous in the positive class, whereas those living in stepfamilies were proportionately more numerous in the positive class and less numerous in the negative class ($\chi^2(4) = 24.76$, p $<$ .001).

There were no significant differences between the classes in terms of revenue, education, and the place of residence. Matrimonial status, the fact of having had a religious marriage, or currently having children in the home did not seem to have an impact on which class the respondents belonged to. This was likewise the case for certain family experiences such as having experienced the separation of one's parents before the age of 18 and having subsequently been in a stepfamily.

Discussion

This study focused on people's views on different aspects of stepfamilies, the goal being to take a close, up-to-date look at the subject. The goal of the analyses was also to verify whether this view was consensual or diversified throughout society and, if it was diversified, to identify the sociodemographic characteristics that were associated with different subgroups.

First, people's general opinion of the stepfamily as a unit showed that stepfamilies were not generally perceived as being of "less value" than were two-biological-parent families, but they were certainly described less positively. This was also the case for single-parent families. This finding was consistent with the trend in the systematic review by Valiquette-Tessier et al. (2016) that traditional parenting roles are less stereotyped than are contemporary parenting roles.

When a common denominator was applied to all the dimensions of people's opinions, it was seen that the favorability score for stepfamilies varied according to the dimensions examined, thus corroborating Valiquette-Tessier et al.'s (2016) comment that several aspects of this question must be examined in order to properly grasp it. Indeed, for a large majority of the respondents, children who grow up in a stepfamily are as likely to thrive and be happy as those who grow up in a two-biological-parent family, an opinion also noted by Duncan and Philips (2008).

The rights and responsibilities of stepparents was another dimension that revealed people's opinions about stepfamilies. From a legal point of view, the status of third parties is traditionally better recognized in Anglo-Saxon countries than in civil law countries. Nonetheless, when we examine the status of the stepparent, we see the lack of consideration it has in family law (Goubau & Chabot, 2018) as well as the considerable differences between states (Katz, 2015). As noted by Goubau and Chabot (2018), the changes occurring in this

area of law are having a hard time keeping up with the transformations in families. The result is that "Family law is thus often a behind-the-times law" (p.1, our translation). To provide support for eventual reforms, it would, thus, be useful to determine people's opinions in this respect. The results reveal that there was considerable consensus for stepparents who take care of their partner's child on a daily basis to consult a doctor for a minor health problem affecting the child, to get the child's report card, and to authorize a school outing for the child. People were rather favorable to the idea that stepparents separated from the parent of a child could have visitation rights. Conversely, people were divided over the idea of giving stepparents the right to cancel a school trip as a disciplinary measure if the child misbehaves or to adopt his or her stepchild if he or she is the person who takes care of the child most of the time (fictional situation). People largely disagreed with the idea of stepparents being able to authorize a major medical operation on the child or being required to provide for the child's financial needs. These positions are only partially consistent with current law (Civil Code of Québec), the exercise of parental authority being restricted to the legal parents. As stepparents do not have legal authority, they cannot act in questions of discipline or authorize medical intervention. Some people nonetheless appeared to support the idea of extending stepparents' rights in terms of discipline and creating a bond of filiation with their stepchildren that exists alongside the parental ties of the two biological parents. Moreover, actions that may be necessary, such as when the parent is unavailable and has temporarily entrusted the custody of the child to the stepparent, received a great deal of support. Under Quebec law, as it currently stands, these actions may indeed be taken if the parent has expressly delegated custody, supervision, and education of the child to the stepparent (601 Q C C). This delegation is, however, temporary and is submitted to the legal parent's control when necessary. Stepparents cannot, therefore, act of their own accord because they do not have parental authority. Furthermore, maintaining ties with third parties (a concept which allows stepparents to be included) is currently authorized when it is in the best interests of the children. That being said, it is the right of the child rather than that of the stepparent (Roy et al., 2015); if the parent is opposed to it, the stepparent has no other choice than to present his or her case in court, an option which would normally discourage most stepparents. Finally, except for very special situations where the stepparent, who is married to the child's parent, takes the role of and acts as a parent (based on the legal principle *in loco parentis*), no financial obligation can be required of a stepparent. Our results show that some people thought it was normal that there be a financial obligation. We noted that people generally agreed with maintaining the current legal status of stepparents, and that their opinion was divided about expanding certain rights and imposing new responsibilities.

Moreover, people's views of stepparents revealed an opinion that was not entirely favorable and that became more negative when examined through the prism of the sexual-abuser-stepfather stereotype. Conversely, the stereotype of the stepfather as physical abuser was not adopted by people. These last two results showed that opinions have changed little in this area over the past 15 years. That being said, there is a major difference that distinguishes our study from theirs, in that the original study was composed of very small samples with very young adults.

The goal of this study was to verify whether it was possible to determine the extent to which peoples' opinions about stepfamilies were similar or different. Our results support the idea of a favorability continuum regarding stepfamilies, as we were able to form three subgroups. However, not all the stepfamily dimensions examined here helped to form these groups. Indeed, the mean scores for the negative stereotypes associated with stepfathers and for stepparents' rights and responsibilities were homogeneous from one group to another. This would seem to indicate that—whether or not the opinion was favorable toward: (a) the stepfamily as a unit, (b) the future of children, and (c) the general perception about stepparents—negative stereotypes about stepfathers were present in all the classes. Also, opinions about stepparents' rights and responsibilities did not greatly fluctuate, granting many rights to stepparents from one class to the next. It would, thus, seem that people's views about stepfamilies are nuanced rather than black and white. Our initial hypothesis is, thus, partially supported.

As concerns the subgroup profiles, our hypothesis was partially corroborated, namely, that women and younger respondents had a more favorable opinion about stepfamilies. This observation is in keeping with those made in other types of studies, revealing that women's and young people's views of family life are generally less conservative (Gubernskaya, 2010; Kinlaw et al., 2015; Pew Research Center, 2011; Treas et al., 2014). Although this may indicate a change in the young generation's opinions, it should be noted that this more positive view did not apply to the stereotype of the sexually abusive stepfather that was present in all age groups.

People who were separated, divorced, or presently living in a stepfamily likewise had a more positive view of stepfamilies according to our data. That being said, this same relationship was not observed in respondents who had experienced separation and stepfamily life during their childhood and adolescence. This view of stepfamily life would, thus, seem to be associated with the respondents' present-day rather than past experience.

This study has certain limitations that should be pointed out. Different indicators were used to measure people's views of stepfamilies, but some dimensions would benefit from a more sensitive and detailed measurement.

For example, only one question was asked to estimate the respondents' opinions about the children's future and to measure the stepparents' responsibilities toward their stepchildren. We coded the terms associated with stepfathers and stepmothers based on our interpretation of the three categories, but were unable to assess the relative importance given to these terms by the respondents. It is, of course, possible that our judgment is not identical to that of the respondents. In our study, the examination of the stereotypes was based on the negative ones, leaving the positive stereotypes in the margins (Claxton-Oldfield et al., 2005; Troilo & Coleman, 2008). Furthermore, the fact of considering stepfamilies as "complex" was seen as a negative stereotype by Ganong and Coleman (2004). That being said, some respondents may have seen the word *complex* as a neutral adjective. Finally, the makeup of the sample was based on the web panel surveys, which is known to cause self-selection bias (Svensson, 2014).

Despite these limitations, this study represents a significant contribution to this field of study, as there is only a limited number of recent studies with often small, unrepresentative samples that focus on one or sometimes two specific dimensions of the phenomenon. The results of the present study were based on a large sample with a wide variety of respondents as regards their sociodemographic characteristics and partner and family trajectories. It is also the first time that people's opinions about several stepfamily dimensions have been examined in the same study, which allowed us to draw out more precise responses. As a result, it was possible to single out people's opinions on several aspects, to evaluate the presence of contrasting opinions, and to identify subgroups that did not share the same views. This study shows that even though it was conducted in a cultural context where stepfamilies are common and viewpoints about families are considered to be more liberal, these families were still perceived less positively than two-biological-parent families. Moreover, stereotypes about stepfamily members remain. That being said, the future of children who lived in these families was viewed positively, and stepparents seemed to be receiving more consideration, particularly at the judicial level. People did not, however, seem to be ready to let stepparents have all the rights of parents. A clear boundary was evident in this regard. This boundary did not reveal a stereotype or a negative image about stepfamilies, but rather the view that the parents' roles and responsibilities fall into different categories.

Conclusion

This study allows us to understand people's positions regarding the diversity of family structures that characterize numerous Western societies. It provides

important information for organizations responsible for updating family law and social policies.

Though there was a positive perception of several stepfamily dimensions, it can be seen overall that the opinions about stepfamilies were not monolithic and that they varied according to the respondents' characteristics. Moreover, the stereotype of the sexual abuser was always present, and this, even among respondents who had a rather favorable opinion of stepfamilies. Future studies will have to examine in greater detail people's opinions about stepmothers, the stereotype of the mean stepmother, and the individual and social impact of living in a culture that maintains stereotypes about the roles held by an increasing number of adults.

Authors' Note

Élisabeth Godbout is now affiliated with University of Quebec in Trois-Rivières.

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Supplemental Material

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