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# Blood thicker than water? Emotional closeness between older parents and adult children in stepfamilies

Torbjörn Bildtgård<sup>a</sup> and Peter Öberg<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Social Work, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden; <sup>b</sup>Department of Social Work and Criminology, University of Gävle, Gävle, Sweden

## ABSTRACT

Increasing prevalence of ageing stepfamilies and stepchildren's potential to act as a source of support for older parents has prompted research about intergenerational cohesion in steprelationships. Our purpose is to investigate emotional closeness in biological and step-relationships in ageing stepfamilies, and the explanations older parents and adult children give to such differences. We study emotional closeness in parent-child relationships among Swedish older parents (aged 66–79) who have raised both biological and stepchildren, and adult children (aged 31–57) who were raised by both biological and stepparents. Qualitative family history interviews ( $n = 24$ ) including hierarchical maps of long-term family relationships were collected and analyzed. Results show biological relationships to be rated as emotionally closer than step-relationships, by both parents and children. This gap in closeness is explained by the informants in terms of (a) personal characteristics, (b) social circumstances and (c) the importance of blood. Both children and parents use the first two explanations, but there is a clear generational difference concerning the perceived importance of blood. While older parents deemphasize the importance of blood for emotional closeness, adult children emphasize it. The study contributes to ageing stepfamily research by including stepfamily members' own perspectives on emotional closeness.

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## KEYWORDS

Ageing stepfamily; older stepparents; adult stepchildren; stepgap; emotional closeness

## Introduction

The rise of divorce culture (Hackstaff, 1999) and the de-institutionalization (Cherlin, 2004) of the family half a century ago led to an increase in stepfamilies in many parts of the Western world (for Sweden, see e.g. Evertsson & Magnusson, 2014) and many older people today have raised stepchildren. In the US in 2012 roughly 40% of middle-aged and older couples (51+) with children were in a relationship where at least one partner had a stepchild (Lin et al., 2018) and in Sweden 20% of people aged 60–90 years report being in regular contact with stepchildren (unpublished results from own 2012 national survey). This increasing prevalence of ageing stepfamilies and stepchildren's

**CONTACT** Torbjörn Bildtgård  torbjorn.bildtgard@socarb.su.se

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potential to act as a source of support for older parents has prompted research about intergenerational cohesion in late-life step-relationships.

Some of these studies have found less intergenerational exchange in ageing stepfamilies than in ageing biological families concerning: financial obligations (Aquilino, 2005) and transfers (Pezzin & Schone, 1999; Pezzin et al., 2008), provision of support (Kalmijn, 2013) informal care (Pezzin et al., 2008; Pezzin & Schone, 1999), contact frequency and relationship quality (Ward et al., 2009). Furthermore, having only stepchildren has been found to increase the risk for ill health and institutionalization for older mothers and lower the life expectancy for older fathers (Pezzin et al., 2013). Ganong and Coleman (2006a, 2006b; see also Ganong et al., 1998) showed that people, in general, tend to think that the moral duty for adult children to provide support for biological parents is bigger than for stepparents, and that the duty to provide support for stepparents depends on the help that stepparents have provided for their stepchildren earlier in life (reciprocity).

A central dimension of intergenerational cohesion is emotional closeness. According to Ganong and Coleman (1990, 2017) the emotional bonds between stepchildren and stepparents tend to be less cohesive and emotionally weaker than biological parent-child bonds. Several studies have found that stepparents have weaker emotional contact with their adult children than do biological parents (see e.g. Arranz Becker et al., 2013; Kalmijn, 2013), while others have presented more mixed results (Steinbach & Hank, 2016). Emotional closeness is of importance for intergenerational exchange – people report greater obligations to assist family members when the relationship is emotionally close (Ganong et al., 1998; Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

Together these studies point to a difference in closeness between biological and step-relationships. This difference is captured by the stepgap concept which was first defined by DeLongis and Preece (2002) as: ‘a way of referring to differences between stepchildren and children-from-birth in terms of parent-child relationship quality’ (p. 118).

The review above shows that research on relationship quality in step-relationships is complex due to the wide variety of dimensions that can be the object of focus (e.g. contact frequency, family obligations, emotional closeness etc.). Another complexity concerns the different forms of comparison that can be made. Some research has compared relationships in intact families to relationships in stepfamilies (inter family comparison) while other have compared biological and step-relationships within families (intra-family comparison). Inter family studies have been critiqued for positing the stepfamily as a deficient alternative to the nuclear family (Coleman & Ganong, 1990; Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Investigating the stepfamily in its own right, focusing on its internal dynamics, as we do in this study, has been proposed as a less biased alternative.

Most of the research has investigated the stepgap *either* from the perspective of older parents *or* from the perspective of adult children. Still, the perspective of stepparents and stepchildren on emotional closeness to biological and social kin might differ. Concerning emotional closeness generally, studies have shown that older parents report being emotionally closer to their children than vice versa. This has been explained by the generational stake hypothesis (Bengtson & Kuypers, 1971): parents are invested in their family project, while children are invested in developing an independent life (Aquilino, 1999; Lynott & Roberts, 1997). As a consequence, parents can be assumed to emphasize family cohesion more than children, also in later life. It is reasonable that stepparents

and stepchildren may have similarly different stakes in the stepfamily. In the present study, we have chosen to include both older parents and adult children.

Most of the research on stepfamily relationships in later life has been carried out using quantitative cross-sectional survey data and has investigated different dimensions of intergenerational solidarity in step- and biological relationships as well as their external determinants. Qualitative studies have been missing and consequently information about how emotional closeness in biological and step-relationships is understood by parents and children themselves. Studies including life-course data have also been scarce. In this article, we proceed from the assumption that family relationships in later life have been shaped over time and take a life-course perspective on step-relationships in ageing step-families. The purpose of the article is to investigate differences in emotional closeness between biological and step-relationships in ageing stepfamilies and the explanations that older parents and adult children give to such potential differences. To do this we have collected two types of data: (1) hierarchical maps that measure parents' and children's relative emotional closeness to family members and (2) qualitative interviews covering their relationships to these family members.

As a theoretical background and methodological heuristic for the study, we have chosen to work with the convoy model of social relationships (Antonucci et al., 2014; Kahn & Antonucci, 1980). This model offers a framework with close similarities to the aims of our study. It assumes that people tend to live their lives in relation to significant others who can be a source of social support, such as aid, affect or affirmation (Antonucci et al., 2004). It approaches these social relationships from a life course perspective, seeing convoys both as a product of a lived life and as changing over time. And the model uses an inclusive perspective on convoy relationships which does not assume that important relationships are necessarily limited to biological family relationships but can also include friends and colleagues or, as in our case, stepfamily members.

To fit our aim we have adapted the convoy model somewhat. As stated above a central point in convoy theory is that anybody can be included as a member of an individual's support network (Antonucci, 1986; Kahn & Antonucci, 1980). However, since our focus is closeness in the ageing stepfamily, we have restricted the convoys to include only members of the family history. And in order to capture family members who used to be, but no longer are, perceived as close we added the possibility of including people outside the circles as currently 'not close'.

## Method

This article is based on a project studying intergenerational solidarity in biological and step-relationships in ageing step-families (Financed by the Swedish Council for Research in Health, Working Life and Welfare, Dnr 2014-0395; vetted and approved by the Swedish Central Ethical Review Board, Dnr 2015-235). For the study, retrospective interviews covering long-term parent-child relationships were carried out with two unrelated samples of Swedish informants – older parents ( $n = 13$ ) who had raised both biological and stepchildren, and adult children ( $n = 11$ ) who had been raised by both biological and stepparents.

Participants were recruited and interviewed between autumn 2015 and spring 2017. The recruitment process used a mix of channels, including ads in retirement magazines, local radio for retirees, organizations for retirees and organizations for step-parents, internet forums for family issues and Facebook ads.

Extensive individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews (mean length 1:24 h for parents, 1:22 for children) were digitally recorded by the authors and transcribed in full. We asked the older parents retrospectively about their family history from adulthood and forwards, including the development of their relationships with each biological and step-child. We asked the adult children retrospectively about their family history from childhood and forwards, and the development of their relationship to each biological parent and stepparent. Following the intergenerational solidarity model (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991) we asked the informants about contact frequency, emotional closeness, help and support, and familial obligations, in relation to every parent and child (biological and step).

The interviews revealed that the parental informants had had a total of 57 children (30 biological; 27 step), the child informants had had a total of 42 parents (22 biological; 20 step). For the parental informants, the described step-relationships had a duration of 13–45 years. For the child informants 19–53 years. Detailed sample descriptives are found in Tables 1 and 2.

Using a modified version of the hierarchical mapping technique (a methodological technique associated with convoy theory, see e.g. Antonucci, 1986; Antonucci et al., 2014) the interviewees were asked to place the members of their family history in a convoy according to *current* emotional closeness (see Figure 1). Hierarchical mapping is a technique that allows us to capture the informant's *relative* emotional closeness to family members and makes it possible to compare emotional closeness in the individual relationships of the informant. The convoy includes four wheels or levels of emotional closeness, ranging from 'not close' through 'close' and 'closer' to 'closest'. The relative placement of family members was often implicit in the family history interviews, but in order to

**Table 1.** Sample descriptives older parents.

Informants	Age	Gender	Current relationship to stepchild's biological parent	N of stepchildren (residential*)	Cohabitation with stepchild in years** (child age at initiation of relationship)	Current age of step-children	N of residential biological children*	N of non-residential biological children (age leaving household***)
P1	79	Female	Widowed	2(1)	5(15); 0(18)	55; 58†	1	1 (6)
P2	71	Female	Divorced†	2(0)	0(7); 0(11)	52; 56	2	0
P3	70	Female	Divorced	2(0)	0(4); 0(6)	42; 44	1	2 (9; 6)
P4	71	Male	Divorced	2(0)	0(6); 0(9)	34; 37	1	2 (4; 2)
P5	72	Female	Married	1(1)	7(13)	51	2	0
P6	76	Female	Married	3(1)	0(2); 0(6); 10(10)	41; 45; 49	3	0
P7	72	Male	Married	2(2)	7(12); 3(15)	51; 54	2	0
P8	74	Male	Married	2(2)	6(14); 4(16)	52; 54	1	2 (4; 2)
P9	66	Female	Married	2(0)	0(7); 0(10)	39; 42	2	0
P10	67	Male	Divorced	2(2)	7(13); 4(16)	26; 29	3	0
P11	74	Female	Married	3(3)	19(1); 5(9); 7(13)	50; 53; 55	2	0
P12	73	Female	Married	3(1)	0(8); 0(13); 4(15)	42; 47; 50	2	0
P13	78	Male	Divorced	1(1)	14(6)	45	1	0

†Deceased.

\*Refers to earlier stages of life when children were still living with parents.

\*\*Age for leaving the parental home has been estimated as 20 where information was missing.

\*\*\*Age when leaving household corresponds to years of cohabitation.

**Table 2.** Sample descriptives adult children.

Infor- mants	Age	Gender	N of stepparents (residential*)	Cohabitation with residential stepparents in years (child age at initiation)	Child age when biological parent left household**
C1	41	Woman	2 (1)	19 (1)	0
C2	42	Woman	2 (1)	10 (10)	5
C3	41	Woman	1 (1)	10 (10)	8
C4	31	Woman	1 (1)	10 (10)	3
C5	45	Woman	2 (1)	5 (4)	0
C6	37	Woman	1 (1)	6 (14)	13
C7	38	Woman	2 (1)	17 (3)	0
C8	57	Man	1 (1)	16 (4)	3
C9	37	Man	2 (1)	14 (6)	5
C10	31	Woman	4 (3)***	3 (7); 1 (7); 8 (12)***	***
C11	37	Man	2 (1)	11 (9)	4

\*Refers to earlier stages of life when children were still living with parents.

\*\*Age when leaving household corresponds to years of cohabitation.

\*\*\*Informant had dual residence in both biological parents' households and had had three stepparents in two households.

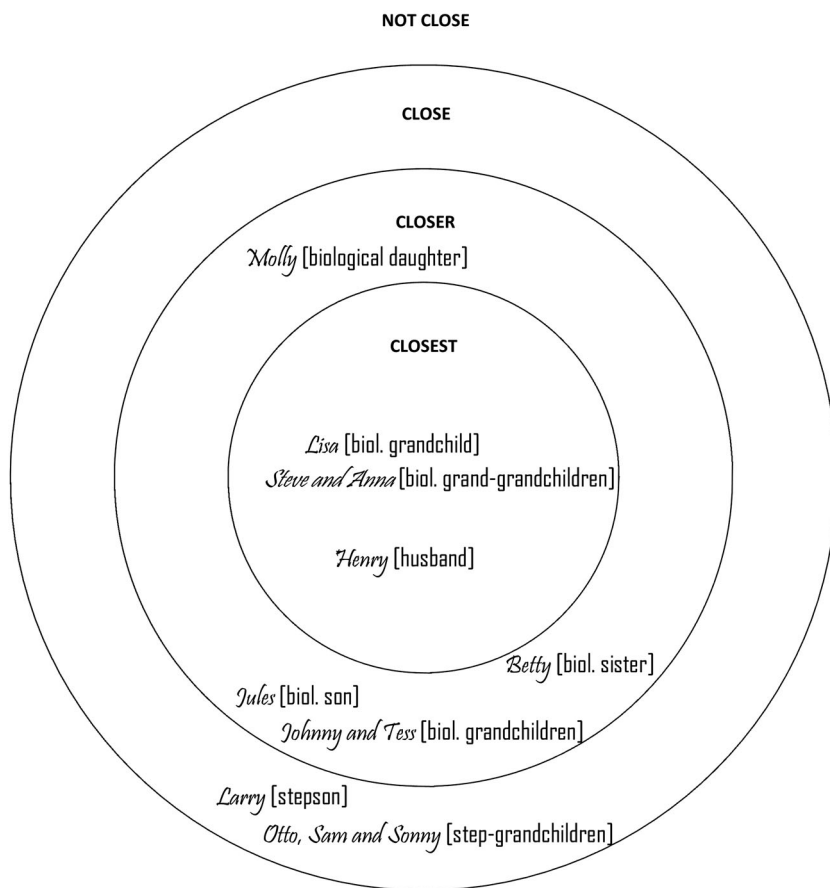
gain additional information the informants were encouraged to qualify their placements and to reflect on reasons for potential differences in emotional closeness to their family members (e.g. in the example in Figure 1 below ‘Why do you place Larry as ‘close?’, ‘Why do you place Molly closer to yourself than Larry?’).

In Figure 1 we present an example of the convoys the informants were asked to fill out. The parental informant (P5) has placed her husband, biological children, biological grandchildren and grand-grandchild, biological sister, stepson and step-grandchildren according to current emotional closeness to herself.

For the purpose of this article only the *children* and *parents* included in the individual convoys have been selected (i.e. siblings, partners and grandchildren have been excluded). These have been aggregated into two figures (Figures 2 and 3 below): One for older parents, including all their biological and stepchildren (e.g. for P5 only Molly, Jules and Larry), and one for adult children, including all their biological and stepparents. While the informants were free to place their family members anywhere in the convoy, the aggregated figures have been standardized to take into account seven levels of closeness: between/outside lines (i.e. ‘not close’, ‘close’, ‘closer’, ‘closest’), or on the lines separating these levels. To avoid clutter, the constructed figures make no difference between individuals who have been placed on the same level even though the informants might have made a slight distinction between them. Sometimes the informants have chosen to leave out stepparents and stepchildren from the convoys. The reason for this was that the informants no longer considered them as family. In order to present a complete picture of children and parents presented in the family history the authors have chosen to include them in the figures as currently ‘not close’ but have used a different convention for marking them.

Below the figures are commented both on an aggregate level (the pattern for all parental and child informants respectively) and an individual level (how individual informants match the aggregate pattern). Is there any difference in how biological and step-relationships are placed with regard to emotional closeness on an aggregate level? Is there any difference on an individual level?

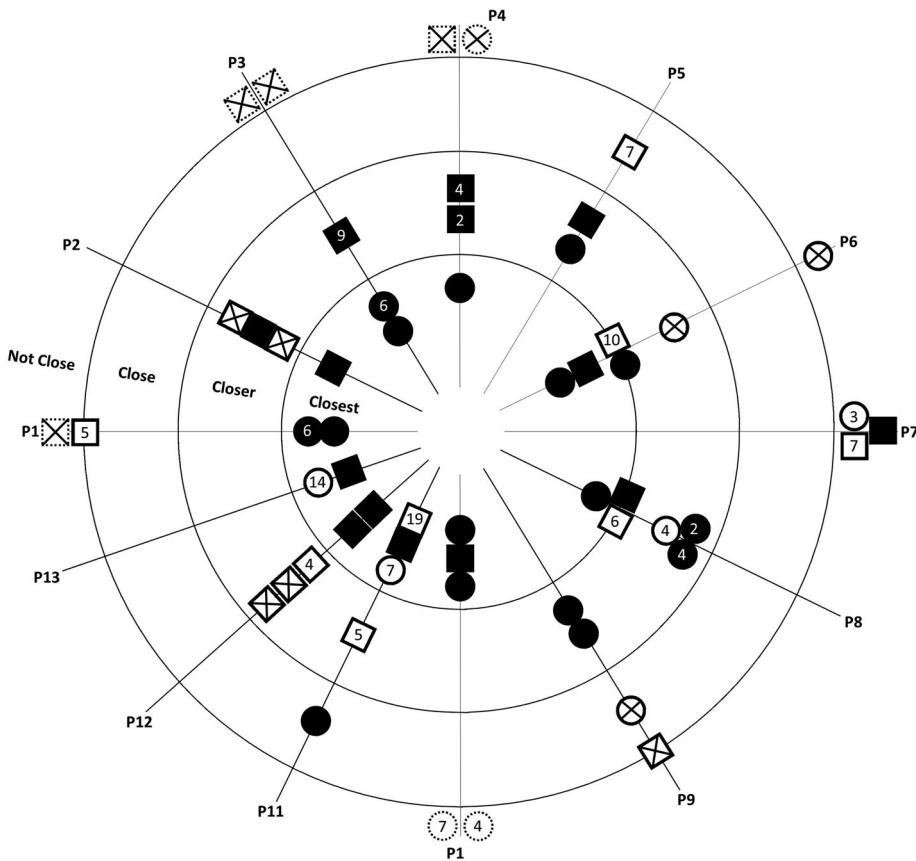
In order to fulfil the study’s aim, the convoys are followed by an analysis of the informants’ own explanations of differences in emotional closeness in biological and step-relationships. The project used a thematic analysis inspired by principles in grounded



**Figure 1.** The map of relative emotional closeness that the informants were asked to fill out. Wheels represent different levels of current emotional closeness. Example from parental informant P5.

theory (Charmaz, 2006; see also Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and phenomenology (Schutz, 1962/1982) in order to capture the informants' own experiences. As described above, both in relation to the convoys and in the family histories the informants were asked to reflect on the emotional closeness they felt towards individual family members. In the second part of the results, we use these 'first order' (in vivo) explanations to generate a 'second order' (in vitro) classification of the offered explanations.

The two authors first separately coded all sections in the transcripts where the informants reason about emotional closeness in relation to family members. These first-order codes were then discussed by the authors in a process where codes were merged and revised and counterevidence was systematically sought, until a common interpretation was reached which resulted in three second-order codes. These codes are presented below as three themes: Explanations based on personal characteristics, circumstantial explanations and explanations based on the importance of blood. Explanations based on personal characteristics and circumstantial explanations were offered by both older parents and adult children with slight differences, whereas the third theme – the importance of blood – clearly divided the two groups.



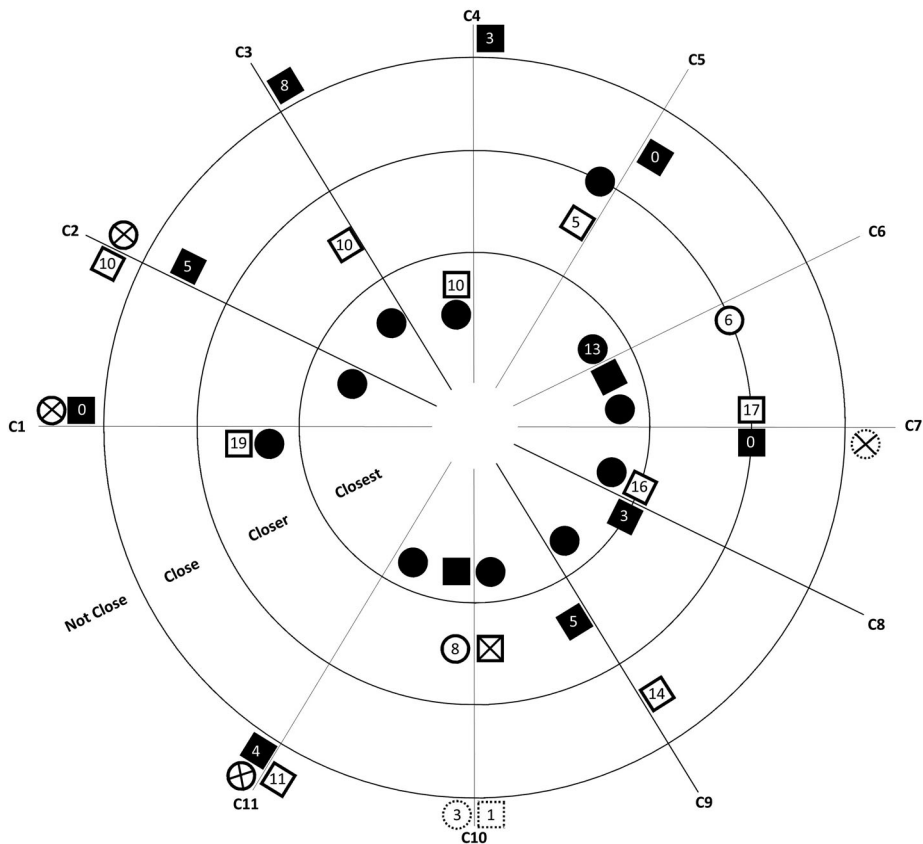
**Figure 2.** Hierarchical map of older parents’ current emotional closeness to their biological children and stepchildren. Wheels represent different levels of emotional closeness. Spokes represent individual numbered parental informants. LEGEND: *Color:* Black boxes/circles are biological children, white stepchildren. *Shape:* Boxes are men, circles women. *(Un)checked:* Unchecked boxes/circles are children who shared household with informant from birth until adulthood, checked (X) figures children who never lived with informant. *Numbers:* Indicate years of shared household with children. *Dashed outline:* Stepchild from family history not included in convoy by informant (included by authors as ‘not close’).

## Results

In Figures 2 and 3 we show aggregate representations of our informants’ perceived emotional closeness to stepchildren and stepparents, expressed as hierarchical maps (convoys). We show that both older stepparents and adult stepchildren tend to see themselves as emotionally closer to biological children/parents than stepchildren/stepparents.

*Older parents:* Looking at the parent’s convoys (Figure 2) from an aggregate level it is evident that biological children tend to be placed in the inner parts of the wheel – as ‘closer’ or ‘closest’. Only in a few exceptional cases (P7 and P11) are biological children placed further out in the wheel. For stepchildren the pattern is more scattered. Stepchildren appear in all sections of the wheel, but are rarely placed at the centre. It is also clear that it is mostly stepchildren who have shared household with the informants for a longer period of time that are placed towards the centre of the wheel, while stepchildren





**Figure 3.** Hierarchical map of adult children's current emotional closeness to their biological parents and stepparents. Wheels represent different levels of emotional closeness. Spokes represent individual numbered child informants. **LEGEND:** *Color:* Black boxes/circles are biological parents, white stepparents. *Shape:* Boxes are men, circles women. *Side of spoke:* Biological mothers (black circles) and their new partners are placed on one side of the spoke, biological fathers (black boxes) and their new partners on the other. *(Un)checked:* Unchecked boxes/circles are parents who shared household with informant from birth until they reached adulthood, checked (X) figures parents who never lived with informant. *Numbers:* Indicate years of shared household with parents. *Dashed outline:* Stepparent from family history not included in the convoy by informant (included by authors as 'not close').

who have not shared the informants' household are mostly placed further out. However, while all biological children that figure in the interviews are also included in the individual convoys, seven stepchildren that are presented in the interviews are not included by the parental informants (these seven stepchildren have been placed by the authors in dashed circles and boxes as 'not close'). It would seem that there is a risk for stepchildren to be unclaimed as family over the life course that is rare for biological children.

But since hierarchical mapping is a relative technique – e.g. 'closest' does not necessarily have the same meaning for all informants – we also have to consider the individual cases or spokes of the model. If we consider the spokes individually we see the same pattern. With few exceptions (P7, P11 and P13) the informants place biological children as emotionally closer than stepchildren and this is true also if no children are placed in the innermost (closest) circle. Some stepchildren may be placed more closely than some biological children,

but in no case is a stepchild placed ahead of all biological children. Thus both at the aggregate and individual level a stepgap is evident: biological children tend to be placed emotionally closer than stepchildren. The results indicate that it is difficult to overcome the difference in emotional closeness to stepchildren and biological children.

*Adult children:* Looking at the children's convoys (Figure 3) from an aggregate level we do not see the same centred pattern for biological relationships as we did for parents. Instead, some biological parents are placed in the centre of the wheel, while others are placed towards the outer parts. To be more precise, those biological parents that the adult child shared their household with as minor children are almost always placed at the centre, while non-residential biological parents are sometimes placed in the periphery of the wheel. A gendered aspect is evident. In this generation, children most often stayed with their mothers after parental divorce, thus biological mothers are most often placed at the centre of the wheel, while non-residential biological fathers are often placed in the periphery. However, in some cases, both biological parents are placed in the centre.

Stepparents are scattered throughout the circle. However, they are rarely placed in the centre of the wheel. The pattern seems to be that stepparents who have lived in the same household as the child are placed closer than those who have not. And since most children have lived in their biological mother's household this means that stepfathers are often described as emotionally more close than stepmothers, who have more often been non-residential stepparents. Also, while all biological parents are included in the convoys some of the stepparents that are mentioned in the interviews are not included by the informants (but have been placed as 'not close' by the authors using dashed circles and boxes).

Again, since the hierarchical mapping technique is relative we also need to consider the individual level – the informants or spokes. In almost all cases at least one biological parent is placed closer than stepparents. Only in one case, C5, is a stepparent placed closer (and in two cases, C1 and C4, as equally close). Also, when stepparents are included as 'closer' or 'closest' they have most often shared the informant's household for a longer period of time. With the exception of C10, non-residential stepparents are never included as 'closer' or 'closest' in the convoys. Former residential stepparents are many times placed as emotionally more close than non-residential biological parents, but there are also a handful of cases where biological non-residential parents are placed as equally close or more close than residential stepparents, despite not sharing their household during their childhood.

### **Older parents' and adult children's explanations for the emotional stepgap**

Despite a wide heterogeneity the convoys demonstrate a clear stepgap in emotional closeness in intergenerational relationships. In this section, we aim to increase the understanding of the described stepgap by adding the informants' own explanations for this difference. Below we identify three categories of reasons given by adult children and older stepparents to explain difference in emotional closeness to the members of their stepfamilies at both earlier and later stages of the relationships: personal characteristics, social circumstances and the importance of blood. These explanations were used by both generations but were emphasized in different ways by adult stepchildren and older stepparents. In particular, adult stepchildren tended to place much more emphasis on the importance of a blood bond for emotional closeness than did older stepparents.

### **Personal characteristics**

Emotional closeness was often individualized. It was common to explain the bigger emotional distance in step-relationships in terms of the personal characteristics of the stepchild or stepparent, rather than in terms of the step-relationship as such. Some of the parental informants described how they were never able to create a close relationship with their stepchildren, not because they were stepchildren but because they found them spoiled, egoistic or a bit odd. For example, one informant explains why she was never able to bond with her stepson:

We never matched. He was used to being a single child and was rather spoiled. And I made demands and that wasn't appreciated, so I guess I was the wicked stepmom. (P5)

Also, older parents would sometimes refer to the personal characteristics of their stepchildren to explain how they had drifted apart when they grew older. One informant (P1) insisted that her stepson, who shared her household for five years, was to this day like a son to her – 'it could not have been different if he had been my real son'. Still, presently she places her biological daughters emotionally closest to herself while her stepson is placed further out in the convoy, at the edge between 'close' and 'not close'. To explain the emotional distance she refers to his individual characteristics – being a bit of an eccentric. He used to be closer but has over the years grown more distant as he increasingly keeps to himself.

He is pretty close but keeps a certain distance. He hugs and likes to be close but he keeps his own life. Even if he sees me as his mother we don't really have very close contact. I think it is because he likes to be alone. / ... / He's a loner, but he didn't use to be, when he lived at home. Then we all spent time together. (P1)

The explanations based on personal characteristics showed a generational difference. When older parents turn to personal characteristics to explain emotional distance in relation to stepchildren they tend to use 'soft' adjectives, such as 'odd' or 'eccentric'. When adult child informants do the same they are noticeably less diplomatic, using words such as 'sadistic', 'mean' or 'dull'. The informant C2 for example, described her stepfather as 'authoritarian' and 'mean': 'I never really liked him, although I accepted him' (C2). A couple of years before the interview her mother had divorced the stepfather and the informant said she was happy about it because he did not treat the mother well. In adult life, she feels no need to reconnect with him and places him as 'not close' in the convoy. In her story, the stepfather's authoritarian personality is the main explanation as to why she never took to him – not the step-relationship itself.

A possible reason for the harsher words used by the adult child informants is that children feel less responsible for the step-relationship. Indeed, the adult children primarily judged stepparents on how 'fun' they had been. They did not easily forgive stepparents for not living up to their ideals and rarely provided circumstantial explanations for this failure. Instead, they referred to the stepparents' personal characteristics.

### **Social circumstances**

A second category of explanations for an emotional stepgap regards social circumstances. This relates to how closeness was affected by factors such as work and geographical

distance, but primarily to how it was affected by third parties. The older parents gave many circumstantial reasons for not having been able to bridge the emotional gap to stepchildren when they were young. These included: (1) being introduced to a child that had already been shaped in another home, (2) not being allowed to take on a full parental role by their partner, (3) being challenged by or having to compromise with a biological parent outside the household, (4) failing to exercise authority over a child that was only living part-time in their household.

The parental informant P6 describes how she gained three stepchildren in her second marriage – one stepson who shared her household and two stepdaughters who lived in the biological mother's household and came to live with the informant only in the weekends. The informant described how she with considerable effort managed to get close to her stepson, despite conflicts with the stepson's biological mother around clothing, manners and more. Today she says that she feels the 'same love, trust and worries' (P6) for her stepson as for her biological children. However, she does not feel as emotionally close to the two stepdaughters who did not share her household, and to whom she never managed to establish a comparably close emotional relationship. In her explanation for difference in emotional closeness to her children, she focuses on the circumstances surrounding her stepparenthood rather than the lack of biological relation.

Many of the circumstances affecting early bonding that were mentioned above were primarily raised by the older parents, perhaps because the children had been too young to recognize them. One circumstance of central importance to the development of the emotional stepgap over time that was raised by both parents and children was the continued relationship between the stepparent and his/her partner – the stepchild's biological parent. In the case of separation the stepchild tended to side with the biological parent, especially if there was any sign of parental conflict involved. Divorce showed how fragile the step-relationship was, and how easily stepparents could be unclaimed as kin at any point of the life-course.

There were some differences in the explanations employed by older stepparents and adult stepchildren, especially when it came to the development of the relationship after the children had moved out of their parental home. The older stepparents often mentioned a circumstance of special importance for a (continued) close relationship to stepchildren – how the relationship between themselves and the child's partner turned out. The stepchild's partner could either facilitate or make the relationship with the stepchild more difficult.

Adult children tended instead to emphasize the importance of becoming parents themselves for the development of emotional closeness to stepparents. For the adult children, the interest their stepparents took in relation to their children served as a litmus test of their parental status. Some were disappointed in the lack of interest shown by the stepparent and saw it as an indication that they were not (or indeed had never been) close, while others had been positively surprised by how their stepparent invested him- or herself in the grandparental role and saw it as evidence of their continued kinship. One informant describes how she got close to her stepfather again after she had her first child:

When I had my older child it clarified everything. He [the stepfather] was so natural in his role as grandfather. Our relationship has become a lot more defined for me now. He has become more like a father again. He was always very natural [as a father] and I'm reminded of that now when he is with my kids. (C7)

To summarize, many social circumstances were mentioned that explained difference in emotional closeness in step-relationships compared to biological relationships. As with personal characteristics, these were mentioned by both older stepparents and adult children, with some slight variations. In our last theme – the importance of blood – the difference between the generations is much more pronounced.

### *The importance of blood*

A third category of explanations for the emotional stepgap is biological belonging. It is also with regard to the importance of a shared blood bond for emotional closeness that we find the strongest difference between the generations. When older parents explain emotional closeness to their children they tend to tone down the importance of blood (the one exception in our data was the informant P10 who claimed that the biological bond was a special form of intimacy that could never be matched in step-relationships). The common pattern among the older informants was to not refer to a biological bond in their explanations of the stepgap.

I've never felt any need to distinguish between the children. I think it is utterly unimportant. They are all part of the family and that is that. (P8)

This sentiment was reflected in the informant's ranking of emotional closeness which did not make systematic difference between biological and stepchildren. Others expressed similar sentiments even though, as expressed in the convoys, they were manifestly closer to their biological children. The parental informant P3 had once been close to her two stepsons but they had lost contact after she got divorced from their father when they were in their teens, and she no longer regarded them as close. The emotional distance was circumstantial rather than blood-related, she claimed:

Love is love. It doesn't matter if you're blood related. It is about people getting close to you, regardless of where they come from originally. (P3)

Some older parents would acknowledge that a difference in emotional closeness between biological and stepchildren existed but that the gap could be bridged and kept closed through hard kinwork. The parental informant P6, introduced in the section on circumstances above, described how she had put a lot of effort into diminishing the emotional distance she felt towards her stepson when he moved into her household at the age of ten:

It is more difficult with stepchildren. I put a lot of work into love. I demanded it of myself, that I should feel the same love for him as for my own children. And I felt guilty when I didn't. Parental love is not a given when it comes to stepchildren. (P6)

In short, although almost all the older parents place their biological children as emotionally closer than stepchildren in their convoys, they refrain from essentializing the emotional difference. Rather they describe the emotional difference as a failure to bridge and keep the emotional gap to stepchildren closed over the life-course, often due either to social circumstances or the personal characteristics of the child.

The idea that biological kinship is of importance for emotional closeness was much more prominent among adult children. Only one adult child informant (C3) was an exception to this rule, claiming that blood was 'overrated' for closeness. The other adult child informants stressed the importance of blood for the parent-child relationship. The biological relationship was described as a link to a past to which the informant

belonged, making the blood bond a special form of intimacy in and by itself. The minimum obligation that the adult children attributed to a biological parent was that he or she should connect the child to its bloodline.

Some of the adult child informants had lost access to a biological parent at a young age – often a father who had left the home. These informants felt that they had lost an important connection to part of their family. One child informant (C1) described her disappointment with her biological father. When her father left he took her biological heritage with him and barred her from access to his side of the family history and family connections, including younger half-siblings. She described that despite being fully integrated into her stepfamily, she always felt that something was missing.

I have a family that feels like a nuclear family, but I have always felt like it is only almost my family. I almost belonged, but not really. There was always that question – who are my real relatives?

Today she places her biological father in the periphery of her convoy ('not close'), while her stepfather, who she has lived with all her childhood, is placed equally close to her as her biological mother. Still, the unrequited love for her biological father was the central plotline in the interview. Her new stepfather could never quite make up for the loss of the biological relationship. This feeling of loss was common among children who had lost contact with a biological parent at an early age. They felt cut off from an important part of their identity which they felt the step-relationship could not fully compensate for.

The continued importance given to biological heritage for identity was also used to explain why some of the child informants placed their biological parents emotionally close in the convoy, although these parents had not played any important part in the informants' past or present lives. One informant (C8) had not met his father between the age of three and 26. Since then they had met only a handful of times. The informant remembered how the father still was a constant presence in his mind when growing up. For him, the biological father represented a piece in his identity, a connection with his roots and a family line – including half-siblings – that had been lost. The informant described how he felt an intimate connection with his father the very instant he first saw him:

I saw how alike our features were – the nose and ears, the face and hands and more. Facial features and posture. All those things that you can't recognize in a stepfather – because he is much taller than me. Inside of me there are genetic pieces that explain how I am. (...) That has always been a puzzle piece that was missing during my youth. (C8)

Today he ranks his biological father emotionally equally as close as his stepfather who raised him and shared his household for most of his childhood and almost as close as his biological mother. Although he liked his stepfather very much he explains that he never thought of him as his real father and didn't want to call him father, because 'calling him dad would betray my real dad'.

Not wanting to call a stepparent father or mother was a sentiment echoed by many of the adult children and seemed to demarcate a line that the step-relationship should not cross. Stepparents were often fondly described by adult child informants as 'actual' parents that had taken concrete responsibility for them as they grew up. These

relationships could be emotionally close. However, although stepparents could become emotionally closer than a specific biological parent, according to the child informants they could not fulfil the emotional potential of a biological parent – that of a shared bloodline.

The importance of the biological connection meant that many child informants were ready to excuse biological parents for not living up to their expectations. Instead of attributing parental flaws to personal characteristics, such as with stepparents, these flaws were for example rationalized on the basis of the parent's own childhood experiences. One child informant (C7) placed her alcoholic and consistently absent biological father equally close to her as the stepfather who had raised her and still played an important part in her life as grandparent to her children. She explains:

He has been able to get away with a lot, just because he is my real father. I don't think I would have had the same tolerance towards a stepparent. (C7)

The informant reflects on her lower tolerance towards her stepfather. After his divorce from her mother, she broke off all contact with him for a couple of years, although the parents remained friends. She reflects on how easy it was to unclaim him as family, although they had had a very close relationship before the divorce: 'He was a kind of throw-away dad somehow, although he has really taken a lot of responsibility'. Today they are reunited and he takes an active part in taking care of her children, unlike her biological father, but both fathers are placed at the same level of emotional closeness. Her story reflects a wider pattern in the data – although step-relationships could be close, unlike the blood relationship they had little that guaranteed their continuity. In this respect they were fragile.

To summarize, in contrast to the older parents, the adult children tend to emphasize the importance of biological kinship for emotional closeness. They stress that the biological relationship is important for belonging and a key to identity. Although individual and circumstantial factors affect the emotional bond with stepparents, according to the child informants the step-relationship can never achieve the emotional potential of the biological relationship.

## Discussion

This study has investigated differences in emotional closeness between biological and step-relationships in ageing stepfamilies and the explanations that older parents and adult children give to such differences. Above we have shown that despite wide heterogeneity in long-term parent/child relationships, at least in our admittedly limited dataset we find support for a stepgap in emotional closeness. Using the hierarchical mapping technique we found that biological relationships were generally seen as emotionally closer than step-relationships. This was evident on the individual level, in how people ranked their family members in relative emotional closeness, but also on an aggregate level, when all informants were added together on 'wheels'. We have also identified three categories of explanations that the informants give for the emotional stepgap: (1) personal characteristics, (2) social circumstances, and (3) the importance of blood. We have shown that older parents and adult children understand stepgap differently. The older parents tend not to essentialize the importance of blood for emotional closeness. In contrast, the

adult children tend to emphasize the importance of biology and explain it in terms of the identity and belonging offered by the biological relationship.

How should we understand the informants' explanations? One possible interpretation is a realist one. As Ganong and Coleman (2017) recognizes, there are many factors that can complicate a step-relationship and make emotional closeness more difficult (albeit not impossible) to achieve. According to our child informants, the lack of a shared and recognized blood bond can make mutual identification and emotional bonding more difficult. Gaining a child who has already partly matured in another home and who other people have (more) legitimate authority over is difficult and so is getting close to a new parent that the child has not chosen and has to adapt to. Neither does it seem unrealistic that a person will find the habits of a stepchild/parent odd and challenging and that this will affect their emotional bond. Later in life, a broken intimate relationship between the parents can have negative effects on the step-relationship. The inclusion of a new partner in the life of the parent or adult child can also affect the relationship.

An additional, slightly more critical, interpretation follows the lines of the intergenerational stake hypothesis (Bengtson & Kuypers, 1971) which claims that parents and children have different investments in the family project. Parents tend to focus on the long-term continuity of the family while children tend to focus on the development of an autonomous identity. It is clear that the older parental informants in our data tend to tone down the importance of blood in their explanations of the emotional stepgap and focus other explanations. Arguably, this reflects not only the actual importance of circumstantial explanations but also a parental investment in keeping the family together by not emphasizing differences (such as blood) that cannot be bridged. Children on their hands were considerably more ready to emphasize the importance of blood and clearly expressed the importance of the biological link for establishing a coherent identity.

The results also have to take into account the contemporary normative context surrounding family life. As expressed by Cherlin (2004), Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002), family life has become deinstitutionalized and individualized and families are often complex systems involving many members who are not necessarily blood-related. As a normative correlate, in large parts of the world (and definitely in Sweden) it is no longer socially correct to make a distinction between family members based on blood (as it might have been a century ago). To be a good parent is to rise above such distinctions and treat children equally and fairly. Hence, it is reasonable that parents will downplay the importance of blood and instead turn to socially more acceptable explanations when they explain the stepgap. Children, on the other hand, are not expected to be responsible for the parent-child interaction and are not bound by corresponding norms when they express affinity for biological and stepparents and are for example free to express that they never liked their stepparents.

This study contributes to the family gerontological literature about the ageing stepfamily by focusing on stepfamily members' – both parents' and children's – own understandings of emotional closeness. Our results demonstrate that step-relationships may become very close but that there are obstacles that make it rare for them to become emotionally as close as biological relationships and to stay so over time. The lack of a biological bond coupled with circumstantial factors means that even though the step-relationship can be emotionally close, it is fragile in nature and risk being unclaimed over time.



The study has certain limitations. First, it focuses on emotional closeness, while other aspects of intergenerational solidarity might express themselves differently. Second, the identified categories of explanations are based on the informants' understandings of their relationships and should not be interpreted as a simple reflection of the mechanisms that influence emotional closeness in step-relationships. Other, unrecognized, explanations for emotional closeness might be important and the ones identified may have been exaggerated by the informants. Finally, the study is based on a rather small Swedish sample of 24 older stepparents and adult stepchildren, even if it reports on their relationships to 99 children and parents. Considering the heterogeneity of the step-family, also reflected in this study, generalizations should be made with caution.

A different kind of limitation connects to the critique of comparing stepfamilies to nuclear families (Coleman & Ganong, 1990; Ganong & Coleman, 2017). A similar critique can be levelled against the comparison of step- and biological relationships. Is the biological relationship a valid normative reference for the step-relationship? Does less emotional closeness necessarily mean that the step-relationship will function more poorly? Our convoys show that it is uncommon for step-relationships to become or remain as close as biological relationships over the life course. They are also more fragile and can easily be unclaimed. Still, much in line with what convoy theory suggests, our results show that step-relationships can remain close and important relationships and sources of social support in later life. We would encourage further research into what affects cohesion in stepfamilies over the life-course. Also, relationships that are not considered emotionally close might still constitute important sources of support. An important agenda for future research would be how stepchildren act as support providers for older parents in need of care.

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