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article

Parenting in stepfamilies: revisiting the stepfather's role

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Based on a symbolic interactionist approach, which focuses on family roles negotiation, this article aims to identify the different ways of constructing stepfathering in stepfamily households. Drawing on 30 in-depth interviews with co-resident Portuguese stepfathers, a diversity of patterns was clearly identified. Some roles, patterns or relationships are more involved, individualised and negotiated, whereas others are more distant, mediated and statutory. The article concludes that the way in which stepfathers build their role in a stepfamily relies mostly on the space granted by the mother as well as the stepfather's willingness to engage in stepfamily life, taking on (or not taking on) tasks and parental responsibilities generally assigned to biological parents. In this sense, the stepfather is a secondary everyday-life parent, who is present and contributes, alongside the mother, to the education and training of the stepchild.

key words stepfamily • stepfather • fathering • family interactions • family roles negotiation • social context

Introduction

Over the past few decades, stepfather families have become increasingly common in Western countries. At the same time, a redefinition of the meanings, representations and practices associated with being a father has taken place, leading to the reinforcement of biological fatherhood. Progress in DNA testing has enabled the identification of the biological father based on a paternity test, which has increased the importance assigned to biological fatherhood (see, for example, Dermott, 2007). In addition, given the importance allocated to paternal involvement as a component of 'new fatherhood' (see, for example, Lamb, 1986), from the mid-1980s onwards, a new model of parental authority regulation was launched: joint legal custody (currently designed as shared parental responsibility) (Martin, 2003). Through the establishment of joint legal custody as the norm, parental negotiation has become a central part of ex-partners' relationships, and the parental bond is preserved in the 'best interests of the child' (see, for example, Déchaux, 1995). Therefore, the biological factor (paternity) has begun to legitimise the daily exercise of fatherhood (fathering), meaning that the stepfather has lost the legitimacy to act as a father on a daily basis (Edwards et al, 2002).

Drawing on 30 in-depth interviews with co-resident Portuguese stepfathers, this article aims to identify the different ways of constructing stepfathering in stepfamily households. Research carried out so far has looked at the social construction of the

stepfather's role as dependent on the presence or absence of the biological father in the stepchild's life (Théry, 1985), while establishing a connection between the ex-spouses/partners' relationships after divorce/separation and their positioning within social class structure (Le Gall and Martin, 1991; Lobo, 1994, 2007; Edwards et al, 2002). Although this is important for our understanding of the current meanings of fatherhood, these indicators are not sufficient for capturing the complexity of the stepfather–stepchild relationship at a time characterised by fathers' growing involvement in their children's lives. From this point of view, the diversity of stepfathering patterns is mainly dependent on the central role of family dynamics (Ganong and Coleman, 2004) and negotiations (Kellerhals et al, 1988; Allan et al, 2001, 2011) within the stepfamily network, which goes beyond household boundaries (Allan et al, 2011; Théry, 1995). I thus adopted a symbolic interactionist approach based on the negotiation of family roles (Finch, 1989; Finch and Manson, 1993), which emphasises stepfathers' agency, that is, the stepfather's position within the stepfamily as a self-made construction (Edwards et al, 2002) gained over time through a relational process of family bonding (de Singly, 1993). In that sense, stepfathering results from the way the stepfather positions himself both as a stepfather and a father and, at the same time, results from the family interactions that occur within the stepfamily network.

To explore this issue, two main analytical axes were outlined – family interactions and socioeconomic context. The results highlight five different patterns of stepfathering (multi-parent, replacement, duality, support, and demission), suggesting that the field of stepfamilies is more complex today than it was in the past. In the analysis that follows, I present each of these patterns in detail along with the theoretical framework, design and context of the research. The article concludes that nowadays, the stepfather is a secondary everyday-life parent whose relationship with the stepchild is mainly constituted and defined by friendship and almost always mediated by the mother. In that sense, the end of the conjugal relationship may well be the end of the stepfather's fathering, thus making this type of child–parent relationship more fragile.

Theoretical framework

At a time when co-parenting has become the norm between parents after divorce/separation, the stepfather's role is no longer linked to the replacement of the biological father. Rather, it has become a new role (Le Gall, 1991), which goes beyond the pre-existing roles of the mother and the father (Ganong and Coleman, 2004; Pryor 2008). It is a role that is not completely institutionalised, be it from a legal or a social perspective (Cherlin, 1978; Bourdieu, 1996), and it is strongly dependent on the commitment between conjugal and parental life in stepfamily households (Allan et al, 2001). Moreover, given the legal recognition of parental responsibility as a right and an obligation assigned to biological fathers, regardless their marital status, today only biological fatherhood is considered 'real' fatherhood.

Yet it seems undeniable that the stepfather is the one who is present on a daily basis. From this point of view, being a stepfather should be understood as a status acquired over time. As Théry and Dhavernas (1993) wrote so well, adopting a very well known expression by Simone de Beauvoir, 'one is not a step-parent, but rather becomes one'. The stepfather develops a parental or quasi-parental relationship with the stepchild, which is affectionate, moral and inscribed in both generational positions and socialisation practices. This parental role can be more legitimate insofar as it allows

returning to a competence acquired and recognised by others (Le Gall and Martin, 1993). However, since ascribed and achieved fathering have become united through a common bond – biology – today it is difficult for the stepfather to be recognised as a parental figure (Edwards et al, 2002). On the one hand, this is because he does not have specific rights and responsibilities regarding the stepchild; on the other hand, it is because his caring role is marginalised, although he carries out some tasks and parental responsibilities related to the stepchild.

In the absence of external regulations, stepfamily members create their own rules, which function as behavioural guidelines within the family (Le Gall and Martin, 1991). But the complexity of modern stepfamily configurations (Allan et al, 2011; Widmer et al, 2012) makes it difficult to define family roles, which is the case with the stepfather's role. In general, people expect stepfathers to be supportive of mothers and friendly to the stepchildren, but do not expect them to be the primary disciplinarian (Fine et al, 1998). Consequently, even if the biological father can now be a central figure as well, the mother is considered the primary parental figure and she usually mediates the stepfather–stepchild relationship (Cadolle, 2000; Pryor, 2004). Therefore, there is a reinforcement of matricentrality in stepfather families, meaning that children are regarded as their mother's.

Fatherhood, motherhood and the socioeconomic context

Although fatherhood and motherhood models are now regarded as equal from a cultural point of view (the same rights, duties, responsibilities and obligations), in practice, the ways of being a father and a mother are strongly anchored in differences between the sexes (see, for example, Wall et al, 2010). It is assumed that women, unlike men, have innate characteristics that allow them to take better care of children, especially when they are small and need extra care. Over time, this social construction around parental roles has been naturalised and accepted as a biological truth (Badinter, undated [1980]), with both men and women transmitting this discourse. The way the current parental stratification system is organised, with mothers playing the primary parental role, cannot be considered the exclusive work of men. Women have also worked toward preserving their privileged parental status (La Rossa, 1997) through the reproduction of traditional gender roles and gender stereotypes.

According to La Rossa (1988), there have been few changes in fatherhood conduct (that is, the practices associated with being a father) in Western countries, and nearly all changes have occurred within the same social group – the middle class. In his opinion, today's fatherhood is different from fatherhood in the past, mainly because there have been changes in the culture of fatherhood (that is, the meanings associated with being a father) induced by a profound transformation in the conduct of motherhood (through women's emancipation). Consequently, there is dissociation between the culture and conduct of fatherhood (La Rossa, 1988, 1997).

In fact, as a result of the new international economic order introduced in the 1970s, there was a massive entry of women into the labour market (mainly in the services sector). From then on, men were no longer the only providers of family support, although being a financial provider remained an important component of fatherhood. Among socially disadvantaged groups, the reorganisation of the economic sectors increased male unemployment, partly due to the decline in secondary sector employment (the industrial sector) (see, for example, Gillis, 2000).

Crompton's (2006) ISSP 2002 data analysis shows that routine and manual labour employees are more 'traditional' in their attitudes to gender roles, and place greater emphasis on family life and obligations than professional and managerial employees, mainly because they have less of a sense of reward in their jobs. They not only feel less rewarded from a material point of view, but also feel less socially recognised and have lower self-esteem. However, as stated by Crompton:

> It is not being argued here that a tendency to place a greater emphasis on the family is necessarily class-specific, but rather, that the characteristics of working class jobs are more likely, in aggregate, to result in people in such jobs putting a greater emphasis on their families than people in more rewarding jobs. (2006: 666)

Gillis (2000) considers that the main question raised by the current crisis of fatherhood is the idea of fatherhood as equivalent to masculinity. Today, fatherhood is just one of the many forms of masculinity available to individuals. Given the example of highly qualified managers, Gillis – following a line of reasoning of Bob Connell (1998) – argues that they have no time to dedicate to family life, since their jobs are very time-consuming and they must be readily available to travel around the world. In his opinion, together with unemployment, the other consequence of the world economic reorganisation of the 1970s was the increase in the number of hours dedicated to work.

It is therefore important to realise the impact of socioeconomic contexts on individual relationships, particularly in family relationships. While individualisation theorists (see, for example, Giddens 1991, 1992; Beck, 1992 [1986]; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) argued that individuals are now free to make their own choices instead of merely following what others have collectively chosen for them (in terms of class, status and gender), it is actually the case that 'individualisation' arguments '… seriously under-estimate the continuing significance of within family patterns of reciprocities and obligations (Finch and Mason, 1993), as well as class-differentiated patterns of behaviour that … serve to reproduce class inequalities' (Crompton, 2006: 664). According to Crompton, 'class' remains a useful concept and the family plays a key role in the reproduction of social classes and inequalities.

Research design

Drawing on the stepfather's viewpoint as a means of understanding family life, the aim of this article is to identify the different ways of constructing stepfathering in stepfamily households. To explore this issue, two main analytical axes were outlined. The first concerns family interactions that occur over time within the stepfamily network, including all family members: stepfather, stepchild, mother, biological father, stepfather's prior children, common children, etc (Théry, 1987; Widmer et al, 2012). The second analytical axis relates to the socioeconomic context, considering the impact that different social and professional backgrounds have on the way stepfathering is engendered. Research has shown how resources allocated to family interactions are connected with the position each individual occupies in the social structure (be it class, gender or other) (Bourdieu, 1980). The question is, in what way do current patterns of stepfathering, which are more likely to be negotiated within the stepfamily

network, remain related to privileged social backgrounds? Or are wider changes occurring and spreading through different socioeconomic contexts?

Since it is important to understand how the current impossibility of replacing the biological father creates different patterns of stepfathering, four key aspects have been considered: (1) the stepfather's position towards parenting (biological and social parenting); (2) the stepfather's parenting trajectory; (3) parental dynamics in the stepfamily (including parental dynamics between mother–stepfather and mother–father); and (4) socioeconomic context.

In order to analyse the impact that life events and transitions have on the way stepfathers manage their present lives and construct their roles, 30 in-depth interviews with co-resident Portuguese stepfathers were applied. The interviews addressed the following topics: (1) the stepfather's parental trajectory (reproductive plans, normative guidelines and relationships with children and stepchildren); (2) the stepfather's marital trajectory (previous marital experiences, normative guidelines on marriage and conjugal life, conjugal dynamics); and (3) the stepfamily's daily life (typical week day, typical weekend, differences between current and previous relationships, daily life with children after divorce/separation, daily life with stepchildren, the relationship between children/stepchildren and between stepchildren/biological father, household tasks, leisure and social activities, formal and informal support networks). In short, it became fundamental to explore stepfathers' interactions, life stories and normative guidelines.

The sample selection was made possible through a snowballing process, taking into account my professional and personal networks, as well as those of the interviewees. Aside from their experiences as resident stepfathers, the selection process took into consideration the following variables: (1) living in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area; (2) living with a divorced/separated woman; and (3) having at least one stepchild below the age of 16 when the stepfamily came together. It was also important to diversify the sample regarding individuals' parenting situations (father and stepfather, stepfather and father and just stepfather), ages (between 25 and 59), levels of education (from Year 6 to PhD), professional activities (from driver to university professor) and income levels (from less than €750 per month to €3,000 and up). The average interview length was three hours. All interviews were tape-recorded and fully transcribed.

Research context

According to census data, between 2001 and 2011, the number of Portuguese stepfamilies more than doubled (126%), from 46,786 to 105,763. In 2011, the number of couples with at least one non-common child living in the household (stepfamilies) represented 7 per cent of the couples with dependent children, reaching 10 per cent in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (Atalaia, 2014). In addition, there has been an increase in the number of people involved in a stepfamily household, especially children. In 2011, 137,064 Portuguese children under 18 lived in a stepfamily, corresponding to 79,776 stepfamily households. However, after a conjugal break-up, the majority of children (of all ages) lived with their mother in a single-parent family. In 2011, of the 852,680 children of divorced/separated parents (Census 2011), 77 per cent lived in a single-parent family and 23 per cent in a stepfamily (approximately a quarter). In that same year, stepfather families represented 78 per cent of all stepfamilies, a clear majority when compared to stepmother families (17%) and blended families (5%).

At the same time, there has been an implicit legal recognition of the new parental figures. According to Article 1906, no 4, of the Portuguese Civil Code (amended by Law no 61/2008 of 31 October), both the mother and the father can delegate specific parental tasks related to a child's daily life to a third person. However, this third person could be anyone, meaning that the 'biological truth' prevails over all other criteria – including affectivity – in the Portuguese legal system (Corte Real, 2016; de Oliveira, 2016). The discussion surrounding the legitimacy of new parental figures has been mainly about same-sex couples' adoption and co-adoption regimes (Law no 137/2015, of 7 September), with the replacement logic prevailing. In that sense, due to the relevance of the biological bond in the parental ties definition, stepparents still have no legal rights or obligations in the performance of their role.

In Portugal, joint legal custody became a possibility in the mid-1990s (Decree-Law no 84/95, of 31 August). However, it took 10 years to become the rule in cases of marital break-up. Law no 61/2008 of 31 October – the Divorce Law – changed the legal regime of divorce while promoting the maintenance of the parent–child relationship after divorce (Article 1906). The establishment of joint legal custody does not necessarily translate into joint physical custody. The child could retain one of the parent's homes as his/her main residence and consequently the parent with whom he/she lives assumes the 'parental responsibility related to the current acts of the child's life', although parents should decide jointly the 'acts of particular importance for the child's life'. However, the law does not mention which are the components of each of the parental responsibility categories mentioned above (current acts and acts of particular importance).

Results

The following analysis explores the diversity of stepfathering patterns revealed by the research. Bearing in mind the key aspects of the analytical axes defined earlier in this article (family interactions and socioeconomic context), five different patterns were identified (multi-parent, replacement, duality, support and demission). Nevertheless, given the limited number of interviews (30), these patterns should be seen as preliminary portraits of case types.

Multi-parent pattern of the engaged stepfather (nine cases)

The multi-parent pattern is characterised by the stepfather's strong willingness to interact with the stepchild. The stepfather shares the childcare duties (such as bathing and putting children to bed) and the household tasks (such as cooking) with his spouse/partner, undertakes specific activities with the stepchild (playing, sharing specific information or watching TV together), and promotes intense communication (showing an openness to dialogue, stimulating the stepchild to think for him/herself and talking about his/her own issues). Vicente (49, PhD, university professor, two prior daughters, two stepdaughters, three years in a stepfamily) describes how communication proceeds between him and his stepdaughters: "I answer all their questions, right?... These are things that I love to do. We're having dinner and once in a while she [the oldest stepdaughter] stays a bit longer at the dining table to talk." Being an engaged stepfather means being present, caring, educating and giving advice.

The stepchild's age and gender differentiates the type of care provided as well as the sorts of activities and conversational subjects. Although the mother is chosen as the child's main confidant, an individualised relationship takes place. The stepfather builds an intimate and affectionate bond with his stepchild based on emotional closeness. However, in cases where the stepfather is also a father (six cases), the father–child relationship is felt as closer, more intimate and more individualised than the stepfather–stepchild relationship. Nuno (51, Master's degree, public servant, one stepdaughter, one daughter in common, 15 years in a stepfamily) sees many differences between being a father and a stepfather: "… that was a relationship I had to win over.… Actions that involve physical proximity happen differently if the person in question is our biological daughter or not."

The engaged stepfather sees himself as an additional parental figure, someone who can act as a moderator in cases of family conflict. The presence of the biological father, even if he is emotionally close to his children, does not prevent the stepfather's involvement. Bernardo (45, university degree, small business owner, two stepdaughters, one daughter in common, 22 years in a stepfamily) struggles with mixed feelings, as he recognised the impossibility of becoming the children's 'real' father from the beginning, but still feels that he is part of their daily life: "… I taught them how to brush their teeth, how to dress, I took them to school, I taught them how to sit at the table, how to eat.... I always told them 'You have a father. That is your father'…. But I also feel I am their father."

Although the mother's disciplinary role is still greater than the stepfather's, she promotes the stepfather's integration as a parental figure. For his part, the stepfather refuses to be seen as an 'intimate outsider' (Papernow, 1993), particularly when important decisions are at stake: "I feel that she [the stepdaughter] looks at me as a sensible adult who is worth listening to" (Nuno).

These stepfathers have been living in their stepfamilies from 6 months to 25 years. When the stepfamilies came together, the stepchildren were very young. In six cases, the stepfathers are also biological fathers – three through previous relationships, two through the current relationships and one through both of them. Their children were planned and the vast majority were born when these individuals were in their twenties. After divorce/separation, the children carried on living with their mothers. In terms of education, these stepfathers have either completed secondary school, have university degrees or hold PhDs, while their partners have at least a university education. Both are highly qualified and have well-paid professional careers, and the majority come from socially privileged backgrounds.

Parental replacement of the substitute stepfather (five cases)

Within the parental replacement pattern, the father and mother's roles are regarded as irreplaceable and complementary; therefore, the stepfather only takes on the father's role in the absence of the biological father. Tiago (25, Year 9 education, driver, one stepchild, about to become a biological father for the first time, two years in a stepfamily) sees himself as a 'father at heart' because "… although the child isn't mine … his father never really cared about him and I'm the one who's raising him … and he treats me like a dad. He even calls me Dad." Being a father means being present, responsible, dedicated and sympathetic. Having children has always been part of these

men's plans, taking place between the ages of 25 and 29. Their children were always planned and are considered to be the greatest priorities in their lives.

This perspective of fatherhood leads them to reject the stepfather title. They feel and act as 'real' fathers. Since their stepchildren and biological children share the same households, the roles they play are interchangeable. As is the case in the father–child relationship, the stepfather–stepchild relationship is characterised by emotional closeness. It is an individualised relationship defined by very limited maternal intervention. The stepfather sees himself as someone who is always present and who cares and educates. He is also an available partner, who helps his wife in caring for the children/stepchildren while undertaking specific activities with them. On her side, the mother tries to rebuild the family, looking not only for a partner but also for a father for her children.

These stepfathers have been living with their stepchildren for 8 months to 12 years. When the stepfamilies came together, all of the stepchildren were under the age of two. They are all fathers and live with at least one child from a previous or current marital relationship. In general, these men and women have intermediate or low levels of education and low-skilled/underpaid jobs, which, in some cases, are associated with short-term contracts, irregular working hours and working shifts. Thus, it is possible to relate the parental replacement pattern with working-class individuals, validating the key findings of Le Gall and Martin (1991) and Edwards et al (2002).

Parental duality of the statutory stepfather (three cases)

In the parental duality pattern, being a father is completely different from being a stepfather. The statutory stepfather sees himself as the main family provider and ideally the main authority figure. The stepfather's everyday life remains unchanged after joining the stepfamily. Filipe (36, university degree, engineer, one stepdaughter, one son in common, two-and-a-half years in a stepfamily) is a good example: "The mother works on Saturdays and on that day, she [the stepdaughter] never gets to stay with me [at home]. Therefore, I've never actually taken care of her…." The stepfather's reduced availability to interact with the stepchild entails a lack of participation in childcare and leisure activities, as well as restricted communication. The stepchild is seen as the mother's child, meaning that the stepfather–stepchild's relationship resists individualisation and is strongly guided by the mother. However, as a father, the stepfather is always available for his child, particularly when they share the same household. He participates in his child's care (changing nappies, feeding and bathing) as a maternal supporter, and promotes educational and leisure activities, revealing a great openness to dialogue (intensive communication). The father–child bond is affectionate and highlighted by a close and intimate relational proximity. Being a father means being an educator, a mate and a family provider.

The biological tie is the most significant relationship in the statutory stepfather's life, with fatherhood being a fundamental piece of the male identity, along with successful professional activities. To Luís (48, Year 11 education, business manager, one prior son, one stepdaughter, 10 years in a stepfamily), his son comes before everything else in his life, including his wife: "My son is my son. There is a lot more than one Isabel [his wife] in the world. But my son is just that one." Luís conveys this idea when explaining that, by sharing his DNA with his child, the parental relationship becomes the "most special relationship that exists", for it is "something which is ours."

In these stepfamilies, the mother is looking for a father for her child and longs to share parental responsibilities and decisions. However, she runs into her partner's reluctance to take over these roles. Given the fact that the biological father is frequently absent or barely present in the child's life, the mother ends up occupying almost all the parental space. The statutory stepfather does little to enforce his will in relation to his stepchild, particularly in terms of education: "Many times I share my opinions, what I think is right.… If the mother and the father want to do something, they do it; if they don't, they don't do it…" (Filipe).

The statutory stepfathers portrayed here each had only one stepdaughter of pre-school age when the stepfamily came together. They have been living together for a period of one-and-a-half years to 10 years. All of them are biological fathers. Both stepfathers and current partners have working-class backgrounds with diversified levels of education (from Year 6 education to university degree), having skilled and semi-skilled professional activities. Although these couples are dual-earners, the stepfathers are the main family providers. The men display work-orientated attitudes, which is reflected in the development of self-employed activities (small business owners and managers or independent workers), assigning to women the responsibilities for household management.

Parental support of the companion stepfather (eight cases)

In the parental support pattern, the mother is recognised and accepted as the primary parenting figure and the stepfather assumes the position of a stepchild's friend. As an external element of the pre-established family dynamic, the stepfather emerges as an 'intimate outsider' (Papernow, 1993). The biological component validates the difference between the mother and stepfather in terms of parental responsibilities, decisions and discipline, thus establishing a parenting hierarchy within the stepfamily household. Xavier (36, artist and entrepreneur, one prior son, one stepdaughter, one-and-a-half years in a stepfamily) says: "There are certain issues which I simply do not get involved with.... No, I do not interfere, I let her [the mother] make the decision."

The mother dictates the *modus operandi* and the stepfather usually accepts these terms, given his own family values. In his perspective, 'mother knows best', the biological father is the 'real' father and the biological children are the 'real' children. The stepfather's role is that of someone who provides maternal support. He helps the mother every time he is asked to, although no particular parental responsibility for the stepchildren is ever taken over, and nor does the stepfather have the same type of affection for them as he has towards his own children. The stepfather–stepchild relationship is constituted and defined by friendship. As Lourenço (55, Year 9 education, retired – former bank manager, three prior children, two stepchildren, 12 years in a stepfamily) puts it: "… there is a friendship relationship between us … it is different from the kind of love between a father and his child. I am not replacing her father. I am a friend."

The companion stepfather does not feel like a father to the stepchildren, and does not wish to replace the biological father. In the cases where the stepfather is also a biological father, the father–child bond is felt as closer and more intimate. The responsibility as a biological father is far greater than the one he has as a stepfather. However, when it comes to family interactions, practices as father and stepfather are not that different. In day-to-day activities, fathering is more subject to gender

differences than to the position occupied within the family structure (father or stepfather). The man develops a complementary role to that of the woman and builds up a parental relationship based on games and fun activities. This perception of the man's role inside the family has a direct impact on the way childcare is provided: "Taking care of children is, first of all, more the mother's task ... and I am the one who gets to play, distract them, teach a game" (Jorge, 39, Year 12 education, commercial, one stepdaughter, two years in a stepfamily). Thus, according to the informants in this category, the gender differences justify the assignment of different parental skills. A mother knows how to best take care of the children, especially if they are young and need extra care. The relationship with the (step)children is established through the mother, even if there is a trend towards individualisation when it comes to face-to-face activities and communication.

The companion stepfathers portrayed here have been living with their stepchildren for periods of one-and-a-half years to 20 years. The stepchildren were aged between 2 and 13 when the families got together. Almost all individuals are also biological fathers, whether from a previous or current relationship. After divorce, the children carried on living with their mothers, and the fathers get to see them only during visiting days. These men, as well as their current partners, have secondary or university education levels and hold semi-skilled or highly skilled jobs, which are almost always well paid. Due to its intrinsic characteristics, this pattern is the most diverse, encompassing individuals with different social backgrounds.

Parental demission of the distant stepfather (five cases)

The parental demission pattern is characterised by the stepfather's unavailability to interact with the stepchild. Regardless of age and gender, the stepfather does not participate in childcare (the mother is the sole caregiver), and does not undertake any activities, while communication is limited to the basics. The stepfather–stepchild bond is defined by a statutory distance, based on the place occupied in the family structure, in which there is a strong maternal intervention. The stepfather is the mother's partner, and he perceives the stepchild more as a 'borrowed child'. Although distinguishing between being a father and a stepfather, the relationship with his own children is quite similar to the one established with the stepchildren. In both cases, there is little paternal involvement. In cases where the stepfather has children from a previous relationship, the distance between father and child became wider after the conjugal break-up. Francisco (37, Year 12 education, head of an IT company, one prior child, three stepchildren, five years in a stepfamily) defines what kind of a father he is: "I am a terrible father. And I don't do those things like carrying the kid piggyback riding, rolling on the floor…, playing football…, because I don't even like playing football."

For these men, professional success is a fundamental requirement for male fulfilment. To Victor (50, postgraduate university degree, executive manager of a public company, one stepdaughter, two children in common, 25 years in a stepfamily), a major commitment to his career meant being less available for family life. This ultimately transformed his wife into a 'super-mum': "I was also a sort of mate ... then I started getting more recognition inside the company…. I spent many weeks abroad…. I skipped parents' meetings … doctor's appointments.... [I] made it easier for her to be a super-mum." In addition, distant stepfathers also consider conjugal life to be much more important than family life. Jaime (58, university degree, head of a department

in a public institution, two stepchildren, 10 years in a stepfamily) expresses this idea by claiming: "What I actually wanted was to see the girl [his current wife] less concerned with children and more dedicated to me.... But I've already understood that is something that has to be there."

The mother is recognised as the primary – and quite autonomous – parental figure. Early on, she sees the children as her responsibility. Sharing parental responsibilities and decisions with the stepfather is out of the question. The stepfamily couple is not a parental couple. The only exception relates to family income, which is largely provided by the stepfather as the main provider and, desirably, the main authority figure. It is, however, an authority associated with sharing the house and is not always recognised and accepted by the other family members, especially by stepchildren.

Considering that the biological father is almost always a present and close figure, the stepfather feels he is unable to occupy the father's place. Ricardo (51, university degree, manager of a private company, one prior daughter, two stepchildren, 16 years in a stepfamily) expresses this feeling in full when he recalls the constant presence of his stepchildren's father on non-scheduled visiting days: "… he would come by the house three times a week in his car, sound his horn for the kids to come downstairs just to say hello … he was very much afraid that the kids would like me more than they liked him."

In the five cases analysed, the stepfathers started living in a stepfamily at least five years ago, when the stepchildren were at least one year old. In three cases, they are also fathers: two from a previous relationship and one from the current one. They all hold well-paid, highly skilled jobs, occupying management positions in their workplaces. Although not all have a university degree, these are men concerned with building successful careers. The women are, in general, less qualified on a professional level than their husbands/partners, having intermediate-level professional careers. This mismatch between men and women's investments in their careers translates into a medium to high placement of the couple in terms of social structure, meaning that a certain homogeneous character is perceptible in terms of social class.

Main findings and conclusions

The diversity of stepfathering patterns analysed here has made it possible to understand that the ways in which stepfathers engender their roles in a stepfamily household relies mostly on how much space is granted by mothers in terms of sharing parental tasks, responsibilities, decisions and discipline (that is, the attitudes of the mothers towards stepfathering, promoting or limiting the interference of stepfathers in parental issues), as well as the willingness of stepfathers to engage in the family life, taking on (or not taking on) tasks and parental responsibilities normally assigned to biological parents. In this sense, the way that family interactions are managed in stepfamilies' households, in particular the mother–stepfather negotiations, shape how responsibilities, solidarities and connections are built within families (Finch and Mason, 1993). These are influenced, but not determined, by the biological father's position in the child's life, particularly in cases of early father–child involvement before family dissolution.

As part of the research work presented here, five different patterns of construction of the stepfather–stepchild relationship were clearly identified: multi-parent, replacement, duality, support and demission. Some roles, patterns or relationships are more involved, individualised and negotiated, whereas others are more distant, mediated and statutory.

This diversity suggests that the field of stepfamilies is more complex today than it was in the mid-1980s, when Théry (1985) introduced the replacement and continuity logics as the two opposite poles of ex-spouses' relationships after divorce/separation.

The adoption of specific measures (such as shared parental responsibility) aiming to bring the non-resident parents (mostly fathers) closer to their children after conjugal break-ups, along with the new fatherhood ideology (for example, involved fatherhood), has reinforced the importance attached to biology in the definition of modern fatherhood. However, since some sort of daily 'fathering' (that is, practices associated with being a father) is actually being done by stepfathers (Edwards et al, 2002), and since their numbers are increasing all over the Western world, the maintenance of the father–child relationship does not always translate into a stepfather's disinvestment in the step-relationship.

As the mother's husband/partner, the stepfather feels he is one of the parental figures at play in the family. The underlying logic is that of parental addition and not of replacement. The stepfather is the one who is present on a daily basis and, together with the mother, ensures the tasks and responsibilities associated with the stepchild. However, the day-to-day performance of the paternal role does not imply that the stepfather sees himself as the 'real' father. Most interviewees see the biological father as the 'father'. The stepfather is a secondary everyday-life parent, who is present and contributes, alongside the mother, to the education and training of the stepchild, taking into account his position as an adult in the relationship (Martin, 2003).

Therefore, the stepfather–stepchild relationship is built over time and influenced by the contractual relationship established between the mother and the stepfather (Allan et al, 2001). The relationship depends on the space in which the family lives – the household – and the time in which the common living experience occurs – the present. At this level, despite the tendency for the stepfather to assume more responsibilities as time goes by, in general his responsibilities cease at the end of the conjugal relationship. In this sense, the end of conjugal relationship may well be the end of the stepfather's fathering, thus making this type of child–parent relationship more fragile. In order to give the stepfather some rights, it is necessary for the biological parents (and not just the mother) and the stepfather to share the same opinions and agree to negotiate the responsibilities and care related to the stepchild. This is particularly difficult to manage when the stepfamily has given rise to a common child, because there are large differences in legal terms between being a biological father and a stepfather.

From that point of view, the stepfather–stepchild relationship is felt and experienced differently to the father–child relationship. As stated by Beck (1992 [1986]): 'The child is the source of the last remaining, irrevocable, unchangeable primary relationship. Partners come and go. The child stays.' Stepfathers feel that stepchildren are their wives' children and it is based on this assumption that the step-relationship is built. Since one of the factors underlying the process of individualisation in contemporary societies is the relational character of family ties (de Singly, 1993), meaning that family relationships have become based more on the relationship content than on their structures, the existence of a strong maternal mediation in stepfather families is felt as a serious obstacle to the construction of an individualised bond with the stepchild.

In addition, the interviewees' socioeconomic status seems to influence stepfathers' role representations. Although authors such as Beck and Beck-Gersheim (2002) and Giddens (1992) devalue the structural variable weight in the family relationship

construction and lived experiences, there is actually a strong association between family representations; in this case, beliefs and definitions of fatherhood and motherhood, and the individuals' socioeconomic contexts. The way stepfathers perceive their roles, as well as others' expectations with regard to their performance (for example, the mother, the biological father, the stepchild, etc), is largely shaped by individual values and representations towards fatherhood, which, in turn, are almost always associated with individual socioeconomic context and social background (Crompton, 2006; Dermott, 2008).

Results from this study also show that in stepfather families, negotiation is based on a parenting hierarchy, with mothering overlapping stepfathering. The existence of a parental relationship previous to the stepfamily formation, associated with the single parent situation after divorce/separation, legitimises this discrepancy (Cadolle, 2007). This parental inequality leads to a strong interdependence between conjugal and parental commitment in stepfather families (Allan et al, 2001). In this sense, and contrary to what happens with biological fathers (dissociation between fatherhood culture and conduct; La Rossa 1988), stepfathering practices appear to be more egalitarian (and more modern) than the values and representations associated with social parenting (or in this case, stepfathering).

Stepfathers participate in family life through the performance of specific domestic and parental tasks, usually as supporters of mothers, and at the same time establish affectionate bonds with stepchildren, which become stronger as time goes by. However, given the persistence of a strong cultural distinction between biological and social fatherhood, they are aware that the lack of legal rights and obligations toward stepchildren influences the way social parenthood is lived on a daily basis. Biological parenting is seen as an obligation and social parenting is seen as an option. At this level, being a biological father seems to foster this distinction, even if the stepfather only sees his biological children during visiting days.

The existence of a parenting hierarchy in stepfamilies allows a questioning of the idea of equity present in the modern definition of parenthood. At a time marked by a progressive equality between men and women from the normative point of view (visible, for example, in the adoption of a gender-neutral expression such as 'parenting'; see, for example, Dermott, 2007) and the introduction of a co-parenting model (in the sense of shared parental responsibility) as the norm in cases of conjugal break-up, it worth noting that in stepfather families, the mother is recognised and accepted as the primary parental figure, which determines the maintenance of inequality between the mother and the stepfather in regards to parenting.

In summary, stepfathers today are doubly marginalised (Edwards et al, 2002). On the one hand, given the relevance of biological bonding in the definition of modern fatherhood, the stepfather has no legitimacy to act as a father in daily family life. On the other hand, given the persistence of traditional gender roles division in stepfamily households, the stepfather's role seems to follow the father's role and emerges as a secondary one when compared to the mother's (Gillis, 2000; La Rossa, 1988). Furthermore, bearing in mind that the stepfather–stepchild relationship results from a mother's choice (Cadolle, 2000), it is easy to understand the weak position of the stepfather when compared to that of the mother. In this sense, and paradoxically, it seems that the stepfather–stepchild relationship resists individualisation and remains dependent on the mother's mediation at a time characterised by the progressive emergence of elective bonds as significant family bonds (de Singly, 1993).

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