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## Relations between Mattering to Step- and Non-Residential Fathers and Adolescent Mental Health

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### Abstract

This study examined the relations between perceptions of 133 early adolescents in stepfamilies concerning how much they mattered to their stepfathers and nonresidential biological fathers and adolescents' mental health problems. Mattering to nonresidential biological fathers significantly negatively predicted mother-, teacher-, and youth-reported internalizing problems. Mattering to stepfathers significantly negatively predicted youth-reported internalizing and stepfather- and youth-reported externalizing problems. For teacher-reported externalizing problems, mattering to stepfathers and nonresidential biological fathers significantly interacted. Mattering to either father predicted low externalizing problems; perceptions of mattering to the second father did not predict a further reduction in problems. Results suggest that mattering is an important aspect of father-adolescent relationships, and highlight the importance of considering adolescents' relationships with both nonresidential fathers and stepfathers.

### Keywords

mattering; parenting; fathers; stepfamilies; adolescent mental health problems

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It is well documented that high quality parent-child relationships provide robust protection against the development of mental health problems in children and adolescents (Luthar, 2006; Masten, 2001). One potentially influential but understudied aspect of parent-child relationships is children's perceptions of how much they “matter” to their parents. The current study examined how perceptions of mattering to nonresidential biological fathers (nonresidential fathers) and mattering to residential stepfathers (stepfathers) relate to mental

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health problems in a sample of adolescents in stepfather families. Below, mattering is defined and the limited research in this area is described. Next, the theoretical framework that underlies the current study is articulated. The findings of the research on aspects of father-child relationships and psychological adjustment of children in stepfamilies are then briefly discussed and the current study is described.

## Mattering

Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) state that to matter is to be noticed, to be an object of concern, and to be needed by a specific individual. A sense of mattering does not require approval or agreement between the parent and child. Rather, disagreement or criticism, while not typically thought of as a hallmark of a positive parent-child relationship, may co-occur with mattering; parents may attempt to control or change their children's behavior precisely *because* they matter. Even in cases where a child does not describe his/her relationship as close or positive, the child may still see him/herself as a primary object of the parent's attention and therefore have a strong sense of mattering to the parent. The conviction that one is unimportant to one's parents is thought to lead to a profound sense of isolation, irrelevance, or meaninglessness (Rosenberg & McCullough). The limited research on the relations between mattering to one's parents and children's psychological adjustment indicates that mattering is negatively related to internalizing and externalizing problems (Marshall, 2004; Rosenberg & McCullough) and positively related to self-esteem and self-concept (Marshall, 2001; Marshall, 2004; Rosenberg & McCullough).

There are numerous theoretical perspectives that focus on how interpersonal relationships influence adjustment. The most relevant theoretical perspective to the current study is attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973). Two primary features of a secure attachment are the perceived availability of the parent and the child's reliance on the parent during times of stress (Bowlby, 1969). When children feel secure and accepted in their parental relationships, they feel less threatened by stressful events (Gunnar, 2000) and generally have more positive developmental and behavioral outcomes (e.g., Bretherton & Munholland, 1999). By extension, it is reasonable to assume that perceived importance to parents (i.e., parental mattering) creates a sense of relatedness and security about one's social position with regard to significant others, which in turn positively influences adjustment (Marshall, 2001, 2004).

Although typically focused on the mother-child relationship, attachment theory predicts that children form multiple attachment relationships with different caregivers across development (e.g., Bowlby, 1969; Howes, 1999) and that each of these relationships may influence children's psychological adjustment (Howes; Main & Weston, 1981). Howes suggests a number of models of how these multiple relationships might influence adjustment, including a "hierarchical model" in which one relationship is most influential (i.e., mother-child relationship), an "integrative model" where each relationship independently and equally affects outcomes, and an "independent model" in which each relationship is differentially related to different outcomes (e.g., mothers influence academic competence, fathers influence negative affect). As children in stepfather families typically have two father figures in addition to their mother, investigation of how mattering to each of these nontraditional fathers relates to children's psychological adjustment over and above mattering to mothers is an important contribution to the understanding of how multiple parent-child relationships influence children's psychological adjustment. Knowing that one is important to the nonresidential father may confirm that the role of being a son or daughter remains salient and stable despite physical distance and comparatively little contact, improving the child's sense of belongingness. Similarly, perceiving oneself as important to the stepfather may enhance one's sense of belongingness and relatedness within a potentially complex family structure (e.g., new father figure, presence of step-siblings and other step-relatives). As children in stepfamilies are likely

less clear about their position within their family structure relative to children in two biological parent families, perceptions of mattering and the associated sense of relatedness may be especially important to their psychological adjustment.

## Nontraditional Fathers and Children's Psychological Adjustment

Societal changes along with increasing involvement of fathers in children's lives is forcing the reshaping of our perspectives on fathers in general, and, more specifically, the role of the father-child relationship in child development and adjustment (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000). Although there has been rapid growth in this area of research, the majority of work has focused on residential biological fathers. Comparatively little work has addressed the contribution of nonresidential fathers and stepfathers (Cabrera et al.) despite their increasing prevalence (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995).

The findings of the research on the links between aspects of children's relationships with their nonresidential fathers or stepfathers and psychological adjustment provide support for the importance of these relationships. In summarizing the literature on the relations between children's psychological adjustment and their relationships with their nonresidential fathers, Amato and Gilbreth's (1999) meta-analysis concluded that the quality of the nonresidential father-child relationship (e.g., emotional quality or closeness) is related to child psychological adjustment, and that nonresidential fathers' participation in aspects of authoritative parenting was the most consistent predictor of positive outcomes. Regarding the research on the stepfather-child relationship and its links to children's psychological adjustment, some investigations have shown that children in stepfather families show no advantage over those in single-parent families in terms of a range of aspects of adjustment (e.g., Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991), whereas others have shown that the presence of a stepfather buffers some of the negative effects of parental divorce (e.g., Bronstein, Clauson, Stoll, & Abrams, 1993). Other researchers have found that stepfathers serve as socialization agents for their stepchildren (Kurdek & Fine, 1993), make positive contributions to children's functioning (e.g., Fine, Donnelly, & Voyandoff, 1991), and that parenting variables are more strongly linked to child outcomes than classic contextual variables (e.g., complexity of family structure; Fine & Kurdek, 1992). For example, authoritative parenting by the stepfather is associated with children's better psychological adjustment, higher quality of life, higher scholastic competence, and fewer behavior problems (e.g., Andersen, Lindner, and Bennion, 1992; Fine, Voyandoff, & Donnelly, 1993).

Only a few studies have considered the *joint* influence of both types of nontraditional fathers on children's psychological adjustment. In the most recent study, King (2006) tested five competing hypotheses regarding the relation between closeness to nonresident fathers and to stepfathers and adolescent functioning. The hypotheses included "irrelevance" (closeness to either father provides no benefit), "primacy of biology" (closeness to the nonresident father is beneficial; closeness to the stepfather provides no additional benefit), "primacy of residence" (closeness to the stepfather is beneficial; closeness to the nonresident father provides no additional benefit), "additive" (closeness to both fathers contributes substantially and independently), and "redundancy" (closeness to one father is sufficient; closeness to the other father provides no additional benefit). King found support for the primacy of residence hypothesis for adolescents' reports of internalizing and externalizing problems, and support for the redundancy hypothesis for grades.

Few other studies have examined the relations between quality of the stepfather-child and the nonresidential father-child relationship and youth adjustment simultaneously. White and Gilbreth (2001) found that quality of both the mother-child and the stepfather-child relationship contributed uniquely and significantly to adolescents' internalizing problems; the quality of the

nonresidential father-child relationship was not significantly related to internalizing or externalizing problems. However, interpretation of these findings is complicated because the measure of the nonresidential father-child relationship differed from that used for mothers and stepfathers. Yuan and Hamilton (2006) found that closeness to the stepfather was negatively associated with adolescent depression and problem behaviors, while closeness to the nonresident father was unrelated to adolescent mental health problems. In contrast to the findings showing that closeness to the nonresidential father was not significantly related to children's adjustment (King, 2006; White & Gilbreth; Yuan & Hamilton, 2006), Berg (2003) found that adolescent reports of closeness to the nonresidential father, mother and stepfather all contributed uniquely to self-esteem.

King's (2006) finding that closeness to both father types was not associated with better grades than closeness to only one father type introduces the possibility of an interactive effect, in which the relation between the quality of the relationship with one father and child functioning depends upon the quality of relationship with the second father. A similar hypothesis has been suggested in the attachment literature, in that children with previous relationship difficulties who transition to a setting where caregivers respond sensitively to their needs can either reorganize their current attachment representations or construct an independent secure representation, thereby mitigating the negative effects of an insecure attachment with another parental figure (Howes, 1999; Main & Weston, 1981). Focusing on stepfamilies, Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) have argued that stepfather-child relationships should make the most contribution to functioning when the child rejects or counter-rejects the nonresidential father.

As described above, the small literature that has included both nonresidential fathers and stepfathers has begun to demonstrate that the quality of these nontraditional father-child relationships is related to children's adjustment, with more consistent support for the stepfather-child relationship (Berg, 2003; King, 2006; White & Gilbreth, 2001; Yuan & Hamilton, 2006) than the nonresidential father-child relationship (Berg; King), and with preliminary evidence of an interactive effect (King). However, these studies have a number of methodological limitations such as the use of a single reporter for predictors and outcomes (Berg; King; Yuan & Hamilton), use of single-item measures (Berg; King; Yuan & Hamilton), and inconsistent measurement of the father-child relationship across father type (White & Gilbreth).

## Current Study

The current study investigated whether mattering to one's stepfather and nonresidential father contributed uniquely to mental health problems over and above mattering to mothers in a sample of adolescents in stepfather families. In addition to examining the main effects of mattering to each type of father, the current study examined whether mattering to nonresidential fathers and stepfathers interacted to predict mental health problems. This hypothesis predicts that mattering a great deal to either father would be linked to fewer mental health problems but that mattering also to the other father would provide little additional reduction in adjustment problems.

In addition to examining an unstudied and potentially important aspect of children's relationships with their stepfathers and nonresidential fathers, the current investigation includes several methodological improvements relative to past studies of father-child relationships in the context of stepfather families. First, unlike other studies in which a single reporter's perspective on relationship quality and adolescents' adjustment was used (e.g., Berg, 2003; King, 2006; Yuan & Hamilton, 2006), this study assesses adolescents', mothers', stepfathers', and teachers' reports of adolescents' psychological adjustment. Judgments of psychological adjustment are affected by various factors including attributions of the causes of the behavior, perceptions of what constitutes problematic behavior, social desirability biases, parental

psychopathology, and affective states (De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005). Given the diversity in data obtained from different sources (Achenbach, McConaughy, & Howell, 1987), it is advantageous to include multiple reporters. Teachers in particular provide a significant and unique perspective, given that they evaluate the child's behavior in the critically important context of school, and use a much larger comparison group than parents and children when rating behavior problems. Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that teacher report of externalizing problems is a better predictor of referrals to mental health services than mother, father, or child report (Stanger & Lewis, 1993). Second, given the unique value of teacher report, the current study provides an additional methodological improvement by being the first to use teacher report to examine the joint influence of nonresidential fathers and stepfathers on children's adjustment. Third, this study controls for mattering to the mother; controlling for aspects of the mother-child relationship is notably lacking in much of the fathering literature (Amato & Rivera, 1999). Finally, the current study utilizes a highly reliable 7-item measure of mattering that is the same across the three parent types, in contrast to the use of single-item relationship measures (Berg; King; Yuan & Hamilton, 2006) or inconsistent measurement across parent type (White & Gilbreth, 2001).

## Method

### Participants and Procedures

The sample consisted of 133 adolescents in stepfather families, as well as their mothers, stepfathers, and two teachers. These families were part of a larger 5-year, 3-wave, two-site study designed to study the father-child relationship in Mexican-American and Anglo-American two biological parent and stepfather families. The project included Mexican American youth because father-child relationships in this ethnic group are understudied and these youth are at high risk for mental health problems (Bray, 1999; Cabrera et al, 2000; Roberts & Chen, 1995).

All adolescent participants were in 7th grade at the time of the first interview. Eligibility criteria for the study were as follows: the target child currently lived with the mother and stepfather; the mother, stepfather, and child were all of Mexican-American or all of Anglo-American ethnic background; the mother, stepfather, and child were all fluent in English or Spanish; and the stepfather had been cohabitating with the mother and child for at least 1 year prior to the first interview. Legal marriage was not required for participation.

The current analyses included 133 of the 175 stepfamilies interviewed at the first wave. For the present analyses, families were excluded if the target adolescent's nonresidential biological father was deceased or the family did not know if he was living ( $n = 23$ ), the formality of the union between the mother and stepfather could not be established ( $n = 3$ ), or the mattering scale for the nonresidential father was not administered due to participant refusal or interviewer error ( $n = 16$ ).

All procedures were approved by the University Institutional Review Boards at both sites. Prior to the interview, youth gave assent, and mothers and stepfathers gave informed consent. Interviews were conducted in the family's home or in university lab rooms; each family member was interviewed individually by a different interviewer. Interviews were conducted in the participant's preferred language.

### Family Recruitment: Arizona Site

Ten schools were selected from all metropolitan area schools based on having at least 30% Mexican-American students; eight of the 10 schools participated. All children in the 7th grade completed a survey about the ethnicity of the family and the relationship between the child and

parents (biological or not). Of the 5,415 children who completed the survey, 2,459 met the study ethnic and family type criteria (e.g., Anglo-American two biological parent family). Recruiters contacted a randomly selected subset of the eligible families ( $n = 640$ ) and mailed them informational packets that included a request for project staff to contact them by phone. A total of 499 of these families were contacted by phone (77.9%) to assess interest and verify eligibility (i.e., family structure, ethnicity, fluency in English or in Spanish, duration of stepfather residence). During this verification process, 124 (24.8%) were found to be ineligible and 133 (26.6%) refused to participate. Of the 242 families (48.5%) that agreed to participate, 2 could not be contacted again, 14 became ineligible, and 25 subsequently refused to participate. A total of 201 two biological parent and stepfamilies were interviewed, representing 55.7% of the families that were determined to be eligible during the telephone contact and remained eligible at the time of interview. The majority of families received \$120 for participation, though the second cohort of Mexican-American stepfamilies received \$200.

### Family Recruitment: California Site

Two school districts that had at least 30% Mexican-American student enrollment were selected for participation. Twelve of the 14 schools contacted in these districts agreed to participate. Family recruitment began with analysis of school records to determine which families likely belonged to one of the four categories of family types (e.g., Mexican-American two biological parent family) based on the first and last names of the family members. These families were then contacted to assess interest and to verify eligibility. Between 77 and 83% of the eligible families contacted agreed to be interviewed, depending on whether or not the calculations included 27 families who refused participation and for whom eligibility could not be determined. Of the 540 families that expressed interest in participating, 66 (12%) could not be reached by phone. Of the 474 families contacted by phone, 165 (35%) were found to be ineligible (e.g., mother and father were found not to be of the same ethnic background), and an additional 61 families (13%) were not invited to be interviewed because the recruitment goal for their family type (e.g., 50 Anglo-American two biological parent families) had already been met. Of the remaining 248 families, 56 (23%) refused participation and 192 (77%) were interviewed.

### Teacher Recruitment

During the interview, adolescents at both sites provided two teachers' names for possible participation. Teachers were sent packets including a letter requesting teacher participation, a questionnaire regarding the adolescent's mental health problems, a copy of the parent's and youth's agreement to contact the teacher, and a small token of appreciation (i.e., five dollars or a coupon for a movie ticket). Teachers were contacted by phone or letter if the questionnaire was not returned to the project staff. For the current sample, teachers returned questionnaires for 122 of the 133 adolescents. Of the 122 adolescents, 93 (76%) had reports from both teachers; the remaining 29 (24%) had one teacher report.

### Sample Characteristics

Adolescents ranged from 11 to 14 years (mean = 12.5;  $SD = 0.59$ ); 55.6% were female. Fifty-two percent of the families were Anglo-American and 48% were Mexican-American. Socioeconomic status was calculated as a multiple of the national poverty line, taking family size into account. Socioeconomic status ranged from .5 to 675.2 times the national poverty line, with a mean of 10.2 ( $SD = 62.6$ ) and a median score of 2.6 times the national poverty line. Fifty-nine percent of the families were legally married; 41% were cohabitating. Stepfathers had lived with the mother and adolescent an average of 5.2 years ( $SD = 2.7$ ; range = 1-12 years). Of the families, 42% were recruited from the California site.



## Measures

**Mattering**—Adolescents completed a 7-item scale, developed for this project, on how much they matter to their mother, stepfather, and nonresidential father. Items were rated on a five point scale, “1”= “strongly agree,” “5” = “strongly disagree.” Items were reverse coded so that higher scores reflect higher perceived levels of mattering. Sample items include “I believe I really matter to my dad,” and “I am one of the most important things in the world to my dad” (see Appendix for complete scale and reverse coding items). In the present sample,  $\alpha$  was .79, .88, and .95 for mothers, stepfathers and nonresidential fathers, respectively.

**Internalizing problems**—Mothers and stepfathers completed a 10-item internalizing problems subscale of the Behavior Problem Index that includes anxious/depressed and withdrawn behaviors (BPI; Peterson & Zill, 1986). For mother and stepfather report in the present sample,  $\alpha$  was .74 and .76, respectively. Teacher report of internalizing problems was measured using the 10-item internalizing problems subscale of the BPI, modified for teacher report. In the present sample,  $\alpha$  was .91. For the 93 youth (69.9%) who had reports from two teachers, a composite score was calculated by averaging the two scores. For the 29 youth (20.6%) who had only one teacher report, that report was used. Eleven youth (8.3%) were missing a teacher internalizing problems score.

Adolescent reports of depression and anxiety were obtained. Adolescents completed 8 items from the Child Depression Inventory (CDI; Kovacs, 1981). These items included the question on suicidality and seven other items that accounted for the largest proportion of variance when all the CDI items were entered in a stepwise regression in another sample. In that sample, the 8-item scale correlated .87 with the total CDI. The CDI has demonstrated adequate test-retest reliability (Reynolds, 1992), and internal consistency (Kovacs, 1981), and has been shown to discriminate between depressed and nondepressed psychiatric patients (Lobovits & Hendl, 1985). One item was dropped to increase reliability in the overall current sample. For the final 7-item measure,  $\alpha$  was .72. Adolescents completed 7 items from the Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale (RCMAS; Reynolds & Richmond, 1978). Items were selected using the procedure described above. The shortened scale correlated .89 with the total RCMAS score in another sample. The RCMAS has demonstrated adequate test-retest reliability, (Reynolds & Paget, 1981), internal consistency (Reynolds & Richmond, 1978), and construct validity (King, Gullone, Tonge, & Ollendick, 1993). One item was dropped to increase scale reliability in the overall sample. In the current sample,  $\alpha$  was .71 for the final 6-item scale. The correlation between the RCMAS and CDI was .65. Accordingly (and as has been done in several previous investigations, e.g., Wolchik, Wilcox, Tein, & Sandler, 2000), we combined them (by first standardizing scores and then averaging the z-scores) to create a single, broader internalizing composite score comparable to that for parent and teacher report of internalizing.

**Externalizing problems**—Mothers and stepfathers completed the BPI externalizing problems subscale (i.e., aggressive and delinquent behaviors). In the present sample,  $\alpha$  was .87 and .88, respectively for mother and stepfather reports. Teacher report of externalizing problems was assessed using 18 items from the externalizing problems subscale of the BPI modified for teacher report. For teacher report in the current sample,  $\alpha$  was .96. For the 93 youth (69.9%) who had reports from two teachers, a composite score was calculated by averaging the scale scores. For the 29 youth (21.8%) with only one teacher report, data from one teacher were used. Eleven youth (8.3%) were missing a teacher externalizing problems score. Adolescent report of externalizing problems was assessed using 12 items from the BPI modified for child report. In the current sample,  $\alpha$  was .83.

**Covariates**—Sex, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and whether the mother and father were legally married, were included as covariates given their demonstrated relations to children's

mental health problems (e.g., Bolger, Patterson, Thompson, & Kupersmidt, 1995; Roberts & Chen, 1995; White & Gilbreth, 2001). Ethnicity was measured by youth report on the recruitment survey. Using parent reported total family income, socioeconomic status was calculated as a multiple of the national poverty threshold, taking family size into account.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Means, standard deviations, possible ranges, actual ranges and Pearson product moment correlations between mattering, internalizing, and externalizing problems are presented in Table 1. Correlations across reporter for internalizing ranged from .18 to .32 and ranged from .30 to .62 for externalizing problems. Given that these correlations were not uniformly large, outcomes were analyzed separately for each reporter. Although the correlations between internalizing and externalizing problems within reporter were large (range = .65 to .82), internalizing and externalizing problems were not combined given that they are qualitatively distinct sets of behaviors and differ in their relations with behavioral and social outcomes (e.g., Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001).

Correlations among the covariates and among the mattering scores were calculated. Only a few were significant. Ethnicity was significantly correlated with mattering to mother [ $r(131) = -.18, p = .04$ ] and mattering to nonresidential father [ $r(131) = -.21, p = .02$ ]; Mexican-American adolescents reported mattering less to their parents than Anglo-American adolescents. Whether the parents were legally married was significantly correlated with mattering to nonresidential father [ $r(131) = -.28, p = .00$ ]; adolescents in cohabitating families reported mattering less to nonresidential fathers than those with legally married parents. Mattering to mother and mattering to stepfather were significantly, positively correlated [ $r(131) = .46, p = .00$ ]. However, mattering to nonresidential father was not significantly related to mattering to mother or stepfather.

### Regression Analyses

Eight hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted. Separate models for each reporter's internalizing problems and externalizing problems scores were tested. The predictors were entered in four steps for each model: 1) covariates; 2) main effect of mattering to mother; 3) main effects of mattering to stepfather and mattering to nonresidential father; 4) interaction term (mattering to stepfather  $\times$  mattering to nonresidential father). To minimize nonessential multicollinearity, mattering variables were centered, and the interaction terms were formed as the cross-product of the centered variables (see Aiken & West, 1991). The significant interaction was probed using procedures described by Aiken and West (1991), in which the simple slopes of the mental health outcome variable were regressed on mattering to stepfather at the mean, 1 *SD* above the mean ("high"), and 1 *SD* below the mean ("low") of mattering to nonresidential father. To ensure that any discrepant findings by reporter were not due to the use of different subsamples, analyses were repeated using only the 122 adolescents who had a score for internalizing problems and externalizing problems from all four reporters. When using this reduced sample, the *p*-value for the regression of stepfather report of externalizing problems on mattering to stepfather changed from .038 to .062. In all other cases, the *p*-values were nearly identical and did not change in significance level. Given that there were no substantial changes in the findings, the analyses with larger sample are presented. Results for the regression analyses, including all raw and standardized regression coefficients, raw standard errors,  $\Delta R^2$  and total  $R^2$  are presented in Tables 2 and 3. The coefficients listed are those calculated at the step at which they were entered.



**Internalizing problems**—Results for mattering to the nonresidential father indicated that there were significant main effects for mother ( $B = -.07$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p = .038$ ), child ( $B = -.05$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p = .014$ ), and teacher ( $B = -.11$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p = .050$ ) reports of internalizing problems. For mattering to the stepfather, there was a significant main effect for adolescent report of internalizing problems only ( $B = -.10$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p = .004$ ). The mattering to stepfather  $\times$  mattering to nonresidential father interaction term was nonsignificant for all reports. The adjusted total  $R^2$  were significant for mother ( $R^2 = .108$ ;  $F(8, 124) = 2.993^{**}$ ) and youth ( $R^2 = .116$ ;  $F(8, 123) = 3.150^{**}$ ) reports; overall these models each accounted for a small portion of the total variance (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). Adjusted  $R^2$  values are reported for the total  $R^2$  given that unadjusted values may overestimate the proportion of variance accounted for when several independent variables are used (Cohen et al.).

**Externalizing problems**—Results for mattering to the nonresidential father indicated no significant main effects for of externalizing problems. For mattering to the stepfather, there were significant main effects for stepfather ( $B = -.25$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $p = .032$ ) and adolescent ( $B = -.26$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $p = .000$ ) report of externalizing problems. The mattering to stepfather  $\times$  mattering to nonresidential father interaction term was significant for teacher report of externalizing problems only (Table 3,  $B = .05$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p = .038$ ). As shown in Figure 1, at low levels of mattering to the nonresidential father (1  $SD$  below the mean), mattering to stepfathers was significantly negatively related to externalizing problems ( $B = -.75$ ,  $SE = .28$ ,  $p = .01$ ), but at high levels of mattering to the nonresidential father (1  $SD$  above the mean), mattering to the stepfather was not related to externalizing problems ( $B = .07$ ,  $SE = .29$ ,  $p = .80$ ). The total adjusted  $R^2$  were significant for stepfather ( $R^2 = .059$ ;  $F(8, 124) = 2.030^*$ ), youth ( $R^2 = .161$ ;  $F(8, 124) = 4.162^{***}$ ), and teacher reports ( $R^2 = .193$ ;  $F(8, 113) = 4.621^{***}$ ); overall these models accounted for a small, medium, and medium portions of the total variance, respectively (Cohen et al, 2003).

## Discussion

The current study is one of few investigations to jointly consider the relations between aspects of both the stepfather-adolescent and nonresidential father-adolescent relationships and youth mental health problems, and the first to explore the main and interactive effects of how much adolescents feel they matter to these fathers on mental health problems. Mattering to both types of fathers was significantly related to adolescents' mental health problems, with some differences in the relations occurring across type of outcome. Mattering to the nonresidential father was significantly related to youth, mother and teacher report of internalizing problems. Mattering to the stepfather was significant related to youth report of internalizing problems. For externalizing problems, mattering to the stepfather was a significant predictor of youth and stepfather report. For teacher report of externalizing problems, mattering to the stepfather interacted with mattering to the nonresidential, such that mattering to the stepfather was more strongly related to externalizing problems at low levels of mattering to the nonresidential father than at high levels of mattering to the nonresidential father and vice versa.

The current findings extend the limited literature addressing mattering and the emerging literature investigating the relation between the quality of children's relationships with their nonresidential fathers and stepfathers and mental health problems in several ways. First, it extends previous literature on mattering by demonstrating that mattering to parents is significantly related to mental health problems of adolescents living in stepfamilies. Second, this study is the first to show that mattering to both nonresidential fathers and to stepfathers is significantly related to adolescents' mental health problems. Third, similar to King (2006), the current study suggests that for school-related behaviors, having a positive relationship with one father figure limits the negative effects of a poor relationship with the other father figure.

These findings inform our general understanding of how adolescents' relationships with multiple parent figures relate to their psychological adjustment. Although traditionally focused on the mother-child relationship, attachment theory also suggests that children can form multiple attachment relationships across development (e.g., Bowlby, 1969; Howes, 1999) and that each of these relationships may influence children's psychological adjustment either directly or interactively (e.g., Howes). Consistent with predictions from attachment theory, youth who felt that they mattered a lot to their fathers had fewer mental health problems than those who felt they mattered little to their fathers. Although not directly examining attachment, the current findings do suggest that adolescents' perceptions of mattering to each of two fathers are important for their psychological adjustment, even after accounting for mattering to the mother.

The current findings are consistent with some previous work addressing the contribution of nonresidential fathers and stepfathers to youth adjustment as well as work exploring the construct of mattering (e.g., Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Andersen et al., 1992; Berg, 2003; King, 2006; Marshall, 2001, 2004; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; White & Gilbreth, 2001; Yuan & Hamilton, 2006). For example, the current results support previous findings that parental mattering is positively related to children's adjustment (Marshall, 2001, 2004; Rosenberg & McCullough) and support Berg's assertion that both fathers are important for children's functioning. In terms of predicting internalizing problems specifically, the current study supports previous evidence of the importance of the stepfather-child relationship (King; Yuan & Hamilton). However, the current study is the first to find a significant relation between the nonresidential father-child relationship and youth internalizing problems. The lack of consistency in this finding may be partially due to conceptual differences between the constructs assessed in previous research and those used in the current study. Constructs assessed in previous work (e.g., closeness) may be more closely linked to the amount of contact between the father and child than mattering; children may report relatively high levels of mattering to their nonresidential fathers despite limited contact. For youth-reported and parent-reported externalizing problems, this study is similar to previous work both in its support of importance of the stepfather-child relationship and in the absence of significant effects for the nonresidential father-child relationship (King; White & Gilbreth; Yuan & Hamilton). In terms of externalizing problems assessed in the classroom context, the current study compliments King's finding for grades; in both studies mattering to one father was sufficient to predict positive outcomes.

Although not tested in this study, it is interesting to speculate about the mechanisms underlying mattering's relation to mental health problems. Mattering is thought to provide a sense of purpose in life, and a sense of relatedness or connection to others (Marshall, 2004); this sense of purpose and relatedness in turn leads to better psychological functioning. A sense of relatedness to fathers may be particularly important for youth in stepfamilies, as they typically undergo many family changes and transitions, likely making their position within these nontraditional family structures less apparent.

The findings between mattering and mental health problems differed as a function of father type and category of mental health problems. In terms of internalizing problems, significant main effects emerged for both father types, but support was more consistent across reporter for mattering to the nonresidential father. Main effects on externalizing problems were found only for mattering to the stepfather. It possible that a sense of importance to the nonresidential father that occurs despite limited time spent together may particularly enhance self-esteem, which may in turn protect the child against the development of internalizing problems (e.g., Robinson, Garber, & Hilsman, 1995). Also, feeling unimportant to the nonresidential father, who is typically expected to love his child unconditionally, or to the stepfather, who plays a central role in the adolescent's daily life, may foster feelings of worthlessness, a central

symptom of depression. In contrast, the significant relation between mattering to the stepfather and externalizing problems may be explained in several ways. Low levels of mattering may lead to increased acting out behaviors to elicit attention from the stepfather and mother (Gardner, 1989). Further, when adolescents feel unimportant to their residential father, they may spend less time at home, enhancing the potential for association with deviant peers and leading to an increase in externalizing problems (Kim, Hetherington, & Reiss, 1999).

The relation between mattering to the stepfather and teacher report of externalizing problems depended on the level of mattering to the nonresidential father. This finding indicates that the adolescent's response to inferred insignificance to the stepfather as assessed by acting out behaviors in the classroom is tempered by a sense of feeling important to the nonresidential father. Adolescents may be less likely to respond to a sense of mattering little to the stepfather by misbehaving in the classroom when they are confident of their value and importance to the nonresidential father. In contrast, youth who believe they matter little to both fathers and therefore have high attention needs and low self-worth may engage in more frequent attention-seeking behavior at school.

As noted above, the present results varied by reporter of the outcome variables. This difference in the nature of findings across reporter may be due to the modest correlations between reports of mental health problems, which has been shown consistently in the larger literature on children's mental health problems (see Achenbach, McConaughy, & Howell, 1987). Differences in the relations between mattering and parents', adolescents' and teachers' reports of mental health problems may be in part due to youth behaviors being situationally specific (Achenbach et al.; De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005). Alternatively, discrepancies may be due to a myriad of other factors influencing individuals' reports such as attributions of the causes of the child's behavior, perceptions of what constitutes problematic behavior, memory recall, social desirability biases, family stress, parental psychopathology and affective states (De Los Reyes & Kazdin).

Interestingly, there was almost no correlation between mattering to the nonresidential father and mattering to the mother or stepfather, while mattering to the stepfather was highly correlated with mattering to the mother. Previous research suggests that parents sharing a household are more likely to coordinate their parenting efforts than parents living in separate households (Maccoby, Depner, & Mnookin, 1990); it is possible that increased similarity in parenting may lead to increased similarity in perceptions of mattering. Additionally, it is possible that affective experiences of the youth with one parent may "spillover" and impact the youth's affective experiences with the other parent in the household (White, 1999). Although the correlation between mattering to the mother and mattering to the stepfather was substantial, mattering to the stepfather was significantly related to internalizing and externalizing problems controlling for mattering to mothers.

There are several limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. First, the study's power to detect significant effects was somewhat limited, especially with regard to interactive effects. Replication with a larger sample will be necessary to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the current results. The sample size also precluded examining how the relation between mattering and mental health problems differed by ethnicity and how mattering to all three parents (mother, stepfather, nonresidential father) interacted to predict mental health problems. A larger sample is necessary to study these questions. Second, the study was cross-sectional and thus inferences about directionality of effects cannot be made. Although it is hypothesized that mattering impacts mental health problems, it is possible that adolescents who are depressed or anxious for other reasons may also be more likely to view themselves as mattering little to their parents. Depressed youth may also withdraw from others, reducing opportunities for positive interaction that affect perceptions of mattering and, youth with externalizing problems may be

particularly difficult to manage, making it more challenging for parents to foster a positive relationship. Third, this study did not control for the effects of other aspects of the parent-child relationship on youth mental health problems. Future work will be necessary to determine the unique contribution of mattering to youth mental health problems over and above other qualities of the parent-child relationship. Fourth, families in the current sample lived in school districts with at least 30% Mexican-American student enrollment, which may limit the generalizability of the findings.

The current study also has a number of important methodological strengths. First, the study employs a unique and diverse sample. As Mexican-American youth are at high risk for mental health problems, and father-child relationships are understudied in this ethnic group, the study's inclusion of a large number of Mexican-American families furthers our understanding of the links between nontraditional father-child relationships and youth adjustment in this growing population. Second, this study uses multiple reporters of youth adjustment. Although the results did vary to some degree across reporters, this study demonstrates relatively robust evidence across reporters that mattering to the nonresidential father and to the stepfather are both important for youth mental health problems. Finally, the current study controls for mattering to the mother, indicating that the nonresidential father and stepfather-child relationships each contribute to youth adjustment over and above the contribution of the mother-child relationship. Controlling for aspects of the mother-child relationship has been notably lacking in much of the fathering literature (Amato & Rivera, 1999).

The findings have several implications for the study of children in stepfamilies. First, the results demonstrate that mattering is an important aspect of the father-adolescent relationship in relation to mental health problems and therefore merits further exploration, such as the evaluation of its relative importance in comparison with other aspects of the father-adolescent relationship (e.g., warmth, discipline). Similarly, exploration of the relation between mattering to other individuals (e.g., acquaintances) and youth mental health problems would clarify the relative importance of parental mattering and mattering more broadly. Future studies should examine the relation between mattering to both types of fathers and youth mental health problems longitudinally to provide the temporal precedence needed to draw appropriate inferences about the directionality of the relations. Another important direction for future research is the exploration of the mechanisms underlying the links between mattering to nonresidential fathers and stepfathers to children's mental health problems.

## Appendix

### Mattering Scale

1. My (target parent) really cares about me. (Reverse Coded)
2. I believe I really matter to my (target parent). (Reverse Coded)
3. I think my (target parent) cares about other people more than me.
4. I'm not that important to my (target parent).
5. There are a lot of things in my (target parent)'s life that matter more to him/her than I do.
6. I know my (target parent) loves me. (Reverse Coded)
7. I am one of the most important things in the world to my (target parent). (Reverse Coded)

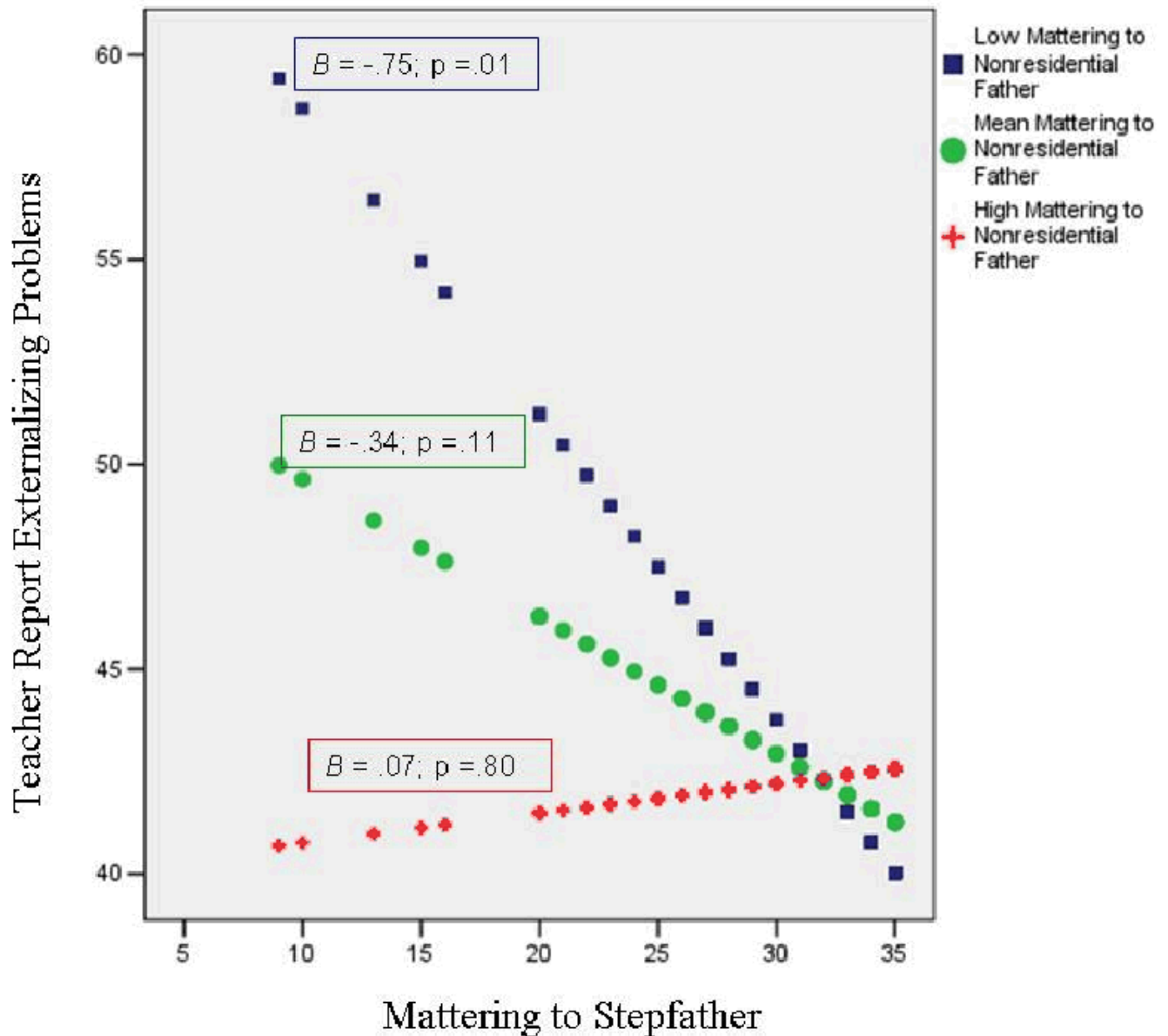
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**Figure 1.** Relation between mattering to stepfather and teacher report of externalizing problems at high, mean, and low values of mattering to nonresidential father.  
*Note.* Raw regression coefficients are presented. Values on the x-axis are uncentered and represent the full range of Mattering to Stepfather.

**Table 1**  
**Correlations of Mattering, Internalizing and Externalizing Problems within and across Reporter (N = 121-133)**

Measure (Report)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Internalizing (M)	--								
2. Internalizing (S)	.32***	--							
3. Internalizing (C)	.31***	.24**	--						
4. Internalizing (T)	.18*	.32***	.26**	--					
5. Externalizing (M)	.65***	.34***	.34***	.27***	--				
6. Externalizing (S)	.32***	.65***	.17*	.35***	.62***	--			
7. Externalizing (C)	.18*	.20*	.65***	.43***	.43***	.32***	--		
8. Externalizing (T)	.06	.26**	.27**	.82***	.30***	.43***	.56***	--	
9. Mattering to M (C)	-.16	-.15	-.23**	-.20*	-.15	-.12	-.23**	-.29**	--
10. Mattering to S (C)	-.04	-.17*	-.31***	-.16	-.15	-.21*	-.38***	-.27**	.46***
11. Mattering to N (C)	-.25**	-.16	-.23**	-.20*	-.11	-.02	-.18*	-.10	.13
<i>M</i>	15.0	14.4	.4	15.5	32.0	31.2	16.6	30.8	32.8
<i>SD</i>	3.3	3.2	2.0	5.4	6.8	6.7	4.2	12.0	3.5
Possible Range	10 - 30	10 - 30	--	10 - 50	20 - 57	20 - 57	12 - 36	18 - 90	7 - 35
Actual Range	10 - 24	10 - 23	-2.70 - 5.86	10 - 37	20 - 51	20 - 49	12 - 30	18 - 74	14 - 35
Measure (Report)	10	11	11						
10. Mattering to S (C)	--	--							
11. Mattering to N (C)	.07	--							
<i>M</i>	29.7	26.9							
<i>SD</i>	5.5	8.9							
Possible Range	7 - 35	7 - 35							
Actual Range	9 - 35	7 - 35							

Note. M = Mother, S = Stepfather, C = Child, T = Teacher, N = Nonresidential Father. Shading indicates correlations across reporter, within internalizing or externalizing problems. Boxed cells indicate correlations within reporter, across internalizing and externalizing problems.

\*p ≤ .05 \*\*p ≤ .01 \*\*\*p ≤ .001

**Table 2**  
**Hierarchical Regressions of Internalizing Problems on Covariates, Mattering to Mothers, Mattering to Stepfathers, Mattering to Nonresidential Fathers, and the Mattering to Stepfather × Mattering to Nonresidential Father Interaction Term**

Measure	Reporter																
	Mother (n=133)				Stepfather (n=133)				Child (n=132)				Teacher (n=122)				
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	
Step 1																	
Child Sex	1.03	0.56	0.16	0.55	-0.45	0.55	-0.07	0.18	0.35	0.35	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.99	-1.89	0.99	-0.17
Ethnicity	1.07	0.59	0.16	0.58	-0.22	0.58	-0.04	-0.18	0.37	0.37	-0.05	-0.05	0.05	1.05	.80	1.05	0.08
SES	-0.01	0.00	-0.17	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.12	0.00	0.00	0.00	-0.05	-0.05	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.03
Formality of Union	0.85	0.60	0.13	0.59	<b>1.22*</b>	0.59	0.19*	0.26	0.38	0.38	0.07	0.07	0.07	1.07	-1.11	1.07	-0.01
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	<b>.10***</b>			.06				0.01					0.04				
Step 2																	
Mattering: M	-0.16	0.08	-0.17	0.08	-0.14	0.08	-0.15	<b>-0.14**</b>	0.05	0.05	-0.26**	-0.26**	0.14	-0.24	0.14	0.14	-0.17
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	0.03			.02				<b>.06***</b>					.03				
Step 3																	
Mattering: S	0.05	0.06	0.09	0.06	-0.08	0.06	-0.14	<b>-0.10**</b>	0.03	0.03	-0.27**	-0.27**	0.10	-0.08	0.10	0.10	-0.08
Mattering: N	<b>-0.07*</b>	0.03	-0.18*	0.03	-0.04	0.03	-0.11	<b>-0.05*</b>	0.02	0.02	-0.22*	-0.22*	0.06	<b>-0.11*</b>	0.06	0.06	-0.19*
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	0.04			.03				<b>.10***</b>					.04				
Step 4																	
Mattering: S × Mattering: N	0.00	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.09	0.00	0.00	0.00	-0.03	-0.03	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	-0.10
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	0.00			.01				.001					.01				
Adjusted Total R <sup>2</sup>	<b>0.11**</b>			.05				<b>.12**</b>					.05				

Note. M = Mother; S = Stepfather; N = Nonresidential Father. All raw and standardized coefficients are reported from the step in which they were entered: Step 1 = Child Sex (1=Male, 2=Female), Ethnicity (1=Anglo-American, 2=Mexican-American), SES, Formality of Union (1=Legally Married, 2=Cohabiting); Step 2 = Mattering (M), Step 3 = Mattering (S), Mattering (B); Step 4 = Mattering (S) × Mattering (B) Interaction. Significant raw coefficients are shown in bold.

\* p ≤ .05

\*\* p ≤ .01



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**Table 3**  
**Hierarchical Regressions of Externalizing Problems on Covariates, Mattering to Mothers, Mattering to Stepfathers, Mattering to Nonresidential Fathers, and the Mattering to Stepfather × Mattering to Nonresidential Father Interaction Term**

Measure	Reporter															
	Mother (n = 133)				Stepfather (n = 133)				Child (n = 132)				Teacher (n = 122)			
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	
Step 1																
Child Sex	-0.98	1.18	-0.07	<b>-2.72*</b>	1.15	0.02	<b>-1.62*</b>	0.72	-0.19*	<b>-8.86***</b>	2.07	-0.37				
Ethnicity	-1.05	1.25	-0.08	-1.73	1.21	0.16	-0.18	0.76	-0.02	1.93	2.19	0.08				
SES	-0.01	0.01	-0.10	0.00	0.01	0.69	0.00	0.01	-0.03	0.00	0.02	0.01				
Formality of Union	1.99	1.28	0.15	1.28	1.24	0.30	1.32	0.78	0.16	0.11	2.24	0.01				
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	.03			.06			.06			<b>.14***</b>						
Step 2																
Mattering: M	-0.31	0.17	-0.16	-0.23	0.17	0.18	<b>-0.26*</b>	0.10	-0.22*	<b>-0.77**</b>	0.28	-0.24				
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	.03			.01			<b>.05*</b>			<b>.05**</b>						
Step 3																
Mattering: S	-0.12	0.12	-0.10	<b>-0.25*</b>	0.12	0.03*	<b>-0.26***</b>	0.07	-0.34***	-0.36	0.21	-0.16				
Mattering: N	-0.06	0.07	-0.08	-0.01	0.07	0.88	-0.06	0.04	-0.14	-0.10	0.12	-0.07				
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	.01			.03			<b>.11***</b>			.03						
Step 4																
Mattering: S × Mattering: N	0.01	0.01	0.08	0.01	0.01	0.26	0.01	0.01	0.06	<b>0.05*</b>	0.02	0.17				
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	.01			.01			<b>.003***</b>			<b>.03*</b>						
Adjusted Total R <sup>2</sup>	.02			<b>.06*</b>			<b>.12***</b>			<b>.19***</b>						

Note. M = Mother; S = Stepfather; N = Nonresidential Father. All raw and standardized coefficients are reported from the step in which they were entered: Step 1 = Child Sex (1=Male, 2=Female), Ethnicity (1=Anglo-American, 2=Mexican-American), SES, Formality of Union (1=Legally Married, 2=Cohabiting); Step 2 = Mattering (M), Step 3 = Mattering (S), Mattering (B); Step 4 = Mattering (S) × Mattering (B) Interaction. Significant raw coefficients are shown in bold.

\* p ≤ .05

\*\* p ≤ .01

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