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My Mother's Husband: Factors Associated with How Adolescents Label their Stepfathers

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Abstract

Adolescents in stepfamilies use different labels when describing their stepfather, such as “stepfather” or “mother’s husband.” These labels may reflect youths’ sense of family identity or dynamics. The current study uses nationally representative data (Add Health) on a sample of adolescents living with their mothers and a married stepfather ($n = 1192$) to examine factors that may be associated with how teens describe their stepfather, and changes in this labeling over a year. Findings suggest that closeness with nonresident fathers increases the likelihood that teens avoid the “stepfather” label, while closeness with mothers increases the likelihood that they adopt the label. Closeness with their stepfather was not associated with how they label him. Other characteristics of the stepfamily are also important predictors of stepfather labeling.

Keywords

adolescents; family processes; father-child relationship; labeling; parent/child relations; stepfamilies

Stepfamilies are a common family form in the United States. Over 7% of American children under the age of 18 were living with a biological parent and a married or cohabiting stepparent in 2009 (Kreider & Ellis, 2011). Estimates of children spending at least part of their childhood living in a stepfamily are higher, at approximately 30% (Bumpass, Raley & Sweet, 1995). While stepfamilies continue to be a salient family form in the tapestry of American family life, the “incompletely institutionalized” nature of stepfamily life contributes to ambiguity over the use of kinship terms to define relationships (Cherlin, 1978; Sweeney, 2010). The current study examines factors that are associated with the labels that adolescents use to define their relationship with their stepfather, in particular, whether they chose the term “stepfather” or “mother’s husband” to describe their stepfathers. The survey instrument used by the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add

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Health) specifically asked adolescents to choose the label that best described their stepfather living in their household, making it possible to assess what factors are related to the terms adolescents prefer to use. The language used to describe this relationship is not trivial, and may provide insights into family processes within stepfamilies.

The new kinship system created through stepfamily formation complicates traditional notions of who is in a “family,” as blood and marriage lines often stretch across multiple households. A family systems approach suggests that interrelations between family members create boundaries for the family system, which are maintained by the individual perceptions of family members (Boss & Greenberg, 1984; Carroll, Olson & Buckmiller, 2007). Ambiguity over the boundaries of a family system may cause stress to this system and require a renegotiation of family roles (Boss, 1977; Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). Given that the dynamic process by which adolescents negotiate labels for their stepfathers may contribute to stress and dysfunction, it is important to understand factors which contribute to this establishment of family boundaries through labeling choices.

Previous research suggests that there may be considerable boundary ambiguity within stepfamilies, brought about by both residential location and complexity (Brown & Manning, 2009; Carroll et. al, 2007; Pasley, 1987). Not everyone living in a stepfamily household has a common definition of who is considered to be part of the family; stepchildren and stepparents are sometimes left out of individuals’ definition of who’s in their family (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991). Boundary perceptions about who is in or out of the family help to foster a sense of identity and belonging within stepfamilies (Pasley, 1987). The definitional process by which family members communicate to outsiders and each other about their familial connections influences family identity (Galvin, 2006). Work by family practitioners also suggests that kinship terms and familial labels are important for stepfamily dynamics (Coleman & Ganong, 1995).

The labels used to identify stepfathers help to express the views stepchildren hold about the nature of the stepfather role (Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998). Kinship terms may symbolize struggles over “family turf” (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991); naming may be a political act. Labels such as “father” and “dad” carry tremendous symbolic power, conveying status and meaning to those they are used to describe. Labels also orient the listener to the nature of familial relationships by identifying familial ties and titles, as well as establishing expectations and conveying meaning about the relationship to the listener (Galvin, 2006). The labels used by stepchildren are central to their sense of how they manage their family’s identity (Kellas, LeClair-Underberg, & Norman, 2008). The choice to refer to a stepfather by his first name or to refer to him as “my mother’s husband” or “my stepfather” reveals a different set of perceived connections (Galvin, 2006, p. 10).

For stepfathers, labeling is part of the claiming process (Marsiglio, 2004). Labels help to clarify the “incomplete institution” of stepfamilies and aid in the social construction of the father role by conveying meaning about the rights and responsibilities associated with the stepfather-stepchild relationship. Moreover, labels can have tremendous emotional importance. Marsiglio (2004) describes the pivotal role of labels for the stepfather experience and the emotional salience for the men in his study of hearing their stepchild call

them “dad” for the first time. Such labels reconfirm these men’s identities as father-figures as well as their role within their family.

Although the labels and kinship terms used to describe relationships within stepfamilies appear to carry significant symbolic meaning for stepfamily members, little is known about factors that may shape the adoption of different kinship labels by stepchildren or how stable these labels are over time. Why do some adolescents refer to “my mother’s husband” whereas others choose “my stepfather”? To better understand what factors may influence the labels that adolescents use to describe their stepfather, and how such labels may change over the course of approximately one year, the current study examines the role of several family and individual characteristics in the stepfather labeling process using nationally representative data from a sample of adolescents living with their mother and a married stepfather (Add Health).

Labeling in Stepfamilies: Theoretical and Empirical Background

Despite widespread discussion about the salience of labels within stepfamilies, limited research has examined factors that contribute to the labeling process. Much of what we know about labeling within stepfamilies is drawn from qualitative work and in-depth interviews, particularly Marsiglio’s (2004) seminal work on stepfathers. Additionally, much of this research takes the point-of-view of the stepfather, focusing on their accounts of when stepchildren call them “Dad”. Given that stepchildren appear to have different ideas about the nature of the stepparent role (Fine et al., 1998) it is also important to consider the perspective of stepchildren as they chose the labels they use to describe their stepfathers.

At first glance, one might think that adolescents’ use of the term “stepfather” and “mother’s husband” is a simple function of how close they are to their stepfathers. Children may begin to use the “dad” title to reference their stepfather because they feel he plays that role in their lives (Marsiglio, 2004). Youth who feel close to their stepfather might use this label to reflect that close bond. When adolescents are not close with their stepfather, they might distance themselves by using the term “mother’s husband.” Feeling close to their stepfather may also motivate youth to adopt the “father” label after initial hesitation. But there could be more going on. Irrespective of how close youth are to stepfathers, the label used might reflect something about relationships with biological mothers and fathers. The terms used may depend on the constellation of all family relationships, not just ties with the stepfather. According to a family systems perspective, families are complex units composed of interconnected relationships which affect and are affected by one another (Cox & Paley, 1997). Therefore, the labels adolescents use to refer to their stepfathers, and the dynamic process through which they adopt or resist kinship terms, is likely influenced by their relations with other family members.

To a certain extent, whether children buy into the new “father” figure depends on the continuing emotional tug the child feels with each biological parent. Youth are conscious of the impact that labels may have and use them judiciously to maintain balance in stepfamily life (Kellas et al., 2008). The development of the stepchild-stepfather relationship occurs within a family context and appears to be influenced by the input of biological parents who

may facilitate or discourage the development of this relationship (Ganong, Coleman & Jamison, 2011; Weaver & Coleman, 2010).

Labeling is likely a dynamic process as stepchildren renegotiate family boundaries in this complex system and shift labels to reflect broader family dynamics. Defining the role of stepfathers within the family constellation is a major challenge facing stepfamilies that may be stressful and require a period of adjustment (Heterington & Jodl, 1994). As youth adjust during this stressful period, they may negotiate the adoption of labels to refer to their stepfathers in different ways. For example, some adolescents may initially resist the “stepfather” label but over time come to use it. Others may initially adopt the “stepfather” label but with time relinquish its use. The negotiation of labels may reflect something about what is going on in the broader family unit. Children are more likely to refer to their stepfather as “Dad” when they have little contact with their biological father (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991). If a non-resident father is involved in the child’s life, the mother and stepfather may encourage the child to save the father label for the biological father (Marsiglio, 2004). Or a child may be hesitant to use a father label for a stepfather if he or she is very close to the nonresident biological father (Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

Children may also look to their mother for guidance on the labeling process, especially if they are close to her. Mothers might encourage children to refer to their stepfather as “Dad” in order to solidify the burgeoning stepfather-stepchild relationship (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991). If youth have a close relationship with their mother it might promote the adoption of the “stepfather” label, even after initial hesitation. Conversely, if they have a poor relationship with their mother they may be less likely to develop a close relationship with their stepfather (King, 2009) or refuse to call him a “stepfather”. This research suggests that adolescents’ relations with their biological parents may influence the labels they choose for their stepfather. Most of this limited research has focused on the role of ties with nonresident fathers, and/or relies on older data about divorce (National Survey of Children, 1976) or qualitative interviews. Additionally, we know little about how much labels change over time.

Other members of the stepfamily may also influence the labeling process. Children may mimic the language used by the stepfather’s own biological children (Marsiglio, 2004); youth with stepsiblings in the household may be more likely to use the “father” label. The addition of a half-sibling in the family may also motivate a renegotiation of the stepfather label, as the stepfather now has a biological bond to the stepchild’s sibling (Marsiglio, 2004). The presence of a half-sibling in the household may also help to facilitate positive relationship development (Ganong et al., 2011). Therefore, youth with half-siblings in the household may be more likely to adopt a “father” label to describe their stepfather. Adolescents who have been exposed to several father figures in the past may also be more hesitant to adopt the “father” label to describe their current stepfather. It remains to be seen how other family members, or dimensions of family history may be associated with the labels adolescents adopt to describe their stepfathers.

Research on adjustment in stepfamilies consistently indicates that relations between stepfathers and stepchildren are more strained when the stepfamily is formed during the adolescent years (Heterington & Jodl 1994). Children who are younger at the time of

stepfamily formation are more likely to perceive their stepparent as a “real” parent (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994), more likely to perceive them as a parent when they are in young adulthood (Ganong, et al., 2011; Schmeeckle, Giarrusso, Feng & Bengtson, 2006), and more likely to refer to their stepparents as Dad or Mom (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Marsiglio, 2004). The longer a stepfamily has been together the more time the stepfather and stepchild have had to develop their relationship, which might promote the use of a “father” label. Additionally, children who are born outside of marriage are more likely to live apart from their biological father and less likely to be involved with them (Lerman & Sorenson, 2000), which might give stepfathers more time to develop a relationship with their stepchild and increase the chance that their stepchild adopts a “father” label.

Other characteristics of the adolescent stepchild or their families may also be associated with how they label their stepfathers over a one year period. Research suggests that boys have better relationships with their stepfathers than do girls (Jensen & Shafer, 2013; King, Thorsen, & Amato, 2014; Pasley & Moorefield, 2004), which might contribute to greater usage of the “father” label among boys. Few studies have explored racial or ethnic differences in relations between stepfathers and their stepchildren (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; King, 2006, 2009; Marsiglio, 1992), and these studies provide mixed findings. Although racial and ethnic differences in stepfather labeling have not been explicitly examined, scholars have suggested that Black stepfathers might be more easily integrated into a stepfamily household, compared with White stepfathers (Stewart, 2007), which may lead to greater usage of a “father” label among Black stepchildren. Socioeconomic resources, such as education and income, might also shape the labeling process through their influence on stepfamily functioning and the development of the stepfather-stepchild relationship (Ganong et al., 2011).

The current study extends prior research by considering how several characteristics of youth (gender, race, age) and their families (closeness to each parent, presence of siblings in the household, prior father figures, adolescent was born in marriage, years in the stepfamily, mother’s education, and income) are associated with the way adolescents label their stepfathers, and whether this changes over a one year time period. While qualitative research has demonstrated the salience of labels for stepfamily claiming and family identity building, this empirical analysis further evaluates what factors influence the labeling process using a nationally representative sample of adolescents.

Method

Data

The current study relies on data from the first and second waves of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health), a nationally representative sample that began with adolescents in grades 7 through 12 in 1994–1995 who were followed up approximately one year later in 1996 ($n = 14,738$). From this main sample, the analytic sample was restricted to adolescents with valid sample weights who were living with their biological mother and a stepfather at both waves ($n = 1,192$). The current study is limited to adolescents whose mothers are married to their stepfathers because adolescents in the Add Health study living with mothers and cohabiting partners were not asked questions about

their relationships with stepfathers. Stepfamilies that began as cohabiting partnerships but married prior to Wave I were, however, included in the present study. The limited number of youth in stepmother families in our sample, relative to those in stepfather families, hinders our ability to do detailed comparative analysis. Therefore, we focus only on stepfather households.

Measures

The dependent variable *stepfather labeling* was measured using information collected from the adolescent at Wave I and II. At each in-home interview, information on the household roster was collected from the adolescent using a series of cards to identify household members and their relationship to the respondent. On the first card the respondent was presented with 29 different household member types (e.g., grandmother, brother, cousin) including two different options to select for their stepfather: (a) “father (including foster, step, adoptive)”, (b) “mother’s husband”. [“Mother’s partner” was also an option for adolescents to choose, but was not used in this study as cohabiting stepfamilies were not examined.] If the respondent selected the first option “father (including foster, step, adoptive)”, they were then presented with a second card and asked to choose one of the six father-types (biological, stepfather, adoptive, step/adoptive, foster, or other). There was no follow-up card for respondents who chose “mother’s husband” at Wave I, but adolescents were prompted with a follow up card if they selected “mother’s husband” at Wave II and asked to further clarify what best described their relationship with that person (e.g. stepfather, adoptive father, step/adoptive father, foster dad, other dad). No one selected “foster father” at Wave I, and very few selected “other father” ($n = 4$). The majority of adolescents who claimed to be living with a non-biological “father” selected “stepfather” at both waves ($n = 817$); the remaining nine selected “adoptive” or “step/adoptive.” Individuals who listed living with their biological mother and either a non-biological “father” (i.e., step, adoptive, step/adoptive, or other dad) or their “mother’s husband” at both Waves I and II were considered living in a stepfamily. The specification of the dependent variable was derived from how this stepfather was labeled over the two waves, “father” or “mother’s husband”: a) *consistently stepfather* (labeled as “father” at both waves, $n = 826$), b) *delayed stepfather* (labeled as “mother’s husband” at Wave I and “father” at Wave II, $n = 147$), c) *retreat from the stepfather label* (labeled as “father” at Wave I and “mother’s husband” at Wave II, $n = 132$), and d) *consistently mother’s husband* (labeled as “mother’s husband” at both waves, $n = 87$).

The *closeness with mother* scale was constructed from five items measured at Wave I asking respondents about the quality of their relationship with their biological mother ($\alpha = .83$; $\bar{x} = 4.47$; $SE = 0.02$). These items, measured on a five-point scale, asked adolescents about how satisfied they were with their relationship with their mother and their communication, as well as whether they agreed or disagreed that their mother was warm and loving, their mother cared about them, and they felt close with their mother.

The adolescents’ *closeness with their non-resident biological father* was measured as a single item at Wave I that asked respondents with a non-resident father “how close do you feel to your biological father”, ranging from 1 = *not at all close* to 5 = *extremely close* ($\bar{x} =$

2.62, SE = 0.08). Adolescents who did not know anything about their biological father or whose biological father had died were given the lowest score on this item.

The labeling process may reflect differences in the quality of the stepfather-stepchild relationship. Unfortunately at Wave I the subset of respondents who lived with their “mother’s husband” were not asked questions about the quality of their relationship with this person. By Wave II this omission was addressed, and all respondents living in stepfamilies, whether they chose the “father” label or the “mother’s husband” label, were asked about the quality of their relationship. Due to the systematic nature of the missing data at Wave I, information on the quality of the stepfather-stepchild relationship was measured at Wave II. Although this proxy was not ideal, it allows for an examination of the labeling process that is independent of the general level of stepfather-stepchild closeness. The correlation between stepfather closeness at Wave I and stepfather closeness at Wave II among those who had valid responses at both time points was moderately high ($r = 0.67$), indicating that change in the perception of closeness with one’s stepfather over the course of a year was not great. *Closeness with stepfather* is a scale constructed from five items, identical to those asked for mother closeness, measured at Wave II asking respondents about the quality of their relationship with their stepfather/mother’s husband ($\alpha = .90$; $\bar{x} = 3.86$; SE = 0.03).

Beyond relationship quality with parental-figures, other aspects of the stepfamily environment and family history were examined. *Time in the stepfamily* was measured in years at Wave I ($\bar{x} = 7.49$, SE = 0.20). Continuous variables measured at Wave I indicate the number of *full-* ($\bar{x} = 0.73$, SE = 0.05), *half-* ($\bar{x} = 0.66$, SE = 0.03), and *step-siblings* ($\bar{x} = 0.20$, SE = .03) living in the household. The *number of father figures* experienced by adolescents during their lifetime ($\bar{x} = 1.96$, SE = 0.03) drew on a series of questions from the parent questionnaire about the mother’s relationship history and was calculated as the number of coresidential relationships (marriages and cohabitations) the child had been exposed to since birth. A binary variable indicated that the adolescent was *born within marriage* (76%).

Background variables included the adolescents’ age, measured in years at Wave I ($\bar{x} = 14.98$, SE = 0.13) and gender, with females (50%) coded as 1 and males coded as 0. Respondents were categorized into a series of race/ethnicity dummy variables: non-Hispanic White (reference group; 73%), non-Hispanic Black (10%), Hispanic (12%), and other race (5%). The level of education of the adolescent’s mother was measured with four dummy variables: less than high school education (reference group; 14%), high school (34%), some college (33%), and bachelor’s degree or more (19%). Family income, reported by a parent at Wave I, was measured as logged dollars (non-logged $\bar{x} = \$48,950$, SE = 2.258).

Analytic Strategy

Multinomial logistic regression models were employed to predict adolescent stepfather labeling using STATA version 12. Alternative specifications were also considered, including collapsing the three groups who did not consistently use the stepfather label into a “reject the stepfather label” group. Analyses with this specification using binary logistic regression masked some of the important variation across these three groups and therefore this approach was not taken in this paper. Adjustments for survey design were made using

weights, stratification, and clustering with the `svy` command in STATA. Missing data was handled using multiple imputation procedures. There was very limited missing data, with the majority of variables having less than one percent of the data missing. Three variables had greater than one percent missing: income (20.6%), the number of prior father figures (11.4%), and whether the adolescents' birth was marital (24.2%). The results of models run using list-wise deletion were very similar. However, multiple imputation procedures are largely considered to be the best way to handle missing data (Johnson & Young, 2011).

Results

The vast majority of youth in stepfather families consistently used the stepfather label at both survey points (67%), while the rest resisted this label in some way, by either delaying its use, retreating from using it, or consistently labeling their stepfather as their "mother's husband". This is consistent with estimates from Furstenberg and Cherlin (1991) using the National Survey of Children, where two-thirds of children considered their stepparents to be part of their family. About a quarter of adolescents changed the label they used to describe their stepfather over this one year period, by retreating from the initial use of a "father" label (12%) or adopting it over time (13%).

Although only a minority of youth rejected using the "stepfather" label, descriptive statistics presented in Table 1 reveal significant mean-level differences across the four stepfather labeling groups on several characteristics. Although some of these group differences were no longer significant in the multivariate models, a comparison of means reveals the similarity and differences among adolescents with different labeling patterns. The significant differences that emerge in mean-comparisons and in the multinomial logistic regression models lend support to the rationale that the three groups of youth who resist the stepfather label, by never using it, delaying using it, or retreating from its use, are conceptually distinct groups in the stepfather labeling process and therefore should be considered separately.

Adolescents who consistently used the stepfather label have, on average, been in a stepfamily for longer, had more stepsiblings in the household, had fewer father figures in their life, and were less close with their non-resident biological father, compared to the other groups. Teens who consistently used the mother's husband label had, on average, been in a stepfamily for less time, had fewer full-siblings and half-siblings in the household, had a lower family income, were less close with their mother, and were closer with their non-resident biological father, compared to the other groups. Adolescents who delayed using the stepfather label, on average, had more full-siblings and more half-siblings in the household, and were closer with their stepfather at Wave II compared to the other groups. Finally, teens who retreated from using the stepfather label were, on average, older and came from families with a higher income, compared to the other groups.

Results from the multinomial logistic regression models reveal that several characteristics of youth and their families were significant predictors of the way they labeled their stepfather over the course of a year. Results indicate that adolescents' relationships with their other parents significantly predicted how they labeled their stepfather (see Table 2). The closer that teens felt to their non-resident biological father, the more likely they were to resist the

stepfather label. A one-unit increase in closeness with one's non-resident father increased an adolescent's odds of being in the "delayed stepfather" as well as the "retreat from the stepfather label" group by 25%, and increased the odds of being in the "consistently mother's husband" group by 34%, compared to being in the "consistently stepfather" group. Closeness with one's non-resident father appears to act as a barrier to using the stepfather label.

Results suggest that teens who consistently used the "mother's husband" label were distinct for their more distant relationships with their mothers. A one unit increase in feeling close to one's mother was associated with 46% lower odds that adolescents consistently used the mother's husband label, compared to the stepfather label. Furthermore, a one-unit increase in closeness with one's mother was associated with 49% lower odds that teens consistently used the mother's husband label rather than eventually employing the stepfather label. This implies that teens who had poorer relationships with their mothers were less likely to adopt a stepfather label, even over time.

Preliminary models which examined change scores for the mother-child and biological father-child relationships from Wave I to Wave II were also conducted. These models suggested that changes in closeness with these parents did not significantly predict labeling choices over this one-year period. Rather, baseline estimates of closeness in these relationships (which do not change much from Wave I to Wave II, but exhibit a slight decline on average in a manner consistent with developmental theories of parent-child relationship development) significantly predicted the label choices for adolescents over this period.

Importantly, results indicate that adolescents' closeness with their stepfather was not predictive of how they labeled them; the labeling process appears to be independent from the quality of the stepfather-stepchild relationship. These results suggest that other parental relationships are more influential on how teens label their stepfather, and this labeling decision is not associated with the quality of the stepfather-stepchild relationship.

For exploratory purposes we examined if the gender of the child moderated the associations between closeness to each parent (mother, nonresident father, and stepfather) and stepfather labeling. Analyses with the inclusion of interaction terms did not indicate any evidence of significant gender differences in these associations.

Other dimensions of the stepfamily environment were also associated with whether and when teens adopted the stepfather label. The longer an adolescent had been living in a stepfamily, the higher their odds were of consistently using the stepfather label, compared to each of the other groups. The more full siblings an adolescent had living with them, the lower their odds of consistently using the mother's husband label compared to the stepfather label. The more step-siblings living with a teen, the lower their odds of delaying using the stepfather label compared to consistently using it. These results suggest that the longer a teen lives with their stepfather, the more likely they are to consistently call him a "father". Additionally, siblings appear to help to promote the stepfather label.

Older adolescents had higher odds of retreating from the stepfather label compared to consistently using the label. The higher adolescents' family income was, the lower their odds of consistently using the mother's husband label compared to the stepfather label. Mother's education was also associated with adolescents' approach to labeling their stepfather. In general, results suggest that teens from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, whose mother's had more education, had higher odds of rejecting the stepfather label by retreating from using it or consistently using the mother's husband label, compared to teens with less educated mothers.

Discussion

The current study illuminates the importance of several factors related to stepfather labeling among adolescents, as well as the dynamic nature of this process. The labels adolescents use to describe their stepfathers are influenced by the other relationships around them, particularly the relationship with their nonresident father. How teens navigate the process of defining who this person is who lives in their household, whether their "stepfather" or their "mother's husband," is shaped by their relationships with their biological parents as well as different aspects of the stepfamily environment. Furthermore, about a quarter of the current sample experienced a change in the label they used to describe their stepfather over a one-year period, which suggests that the process by which youth identify their relation to their stepfather is quite fluid.

Relations with nonresident fathers emerge as an especially important predictor of the stepfather labeling process. Results indicate that the closer a teen feels to their non-resident biological father, the more likely they are to reject the stepfather label in some way, by delaying its use, retreating from using it, or consistently using the mother's husband label instead. Perhaps the salience of this paternal bond affects not only whether youth call their stepfather "dad" in person (e.g. Marsiglio, 2004), but also whether they will label him as a father-figure to others. A number of studies suggest that the quality of the relationship between children and their nonresident fathers, and between stepchildren and their stepfathers is largely independent of one another (King, 2006, 2009; King et al., 2014), but this study suggests one domain where the quality of the nonresident father-child relationship has an implication, for stepfather labeling. High quality relationships with nonresident fathers may not preclude the development of close relations with stepfathers, but it may make adolescents less likely to adopt the stepfather label. The adoption of this label appears to say something more about the nonresident father-child relationship than the stepfather-stepchild relationship, which supports the notion that loyalty to the nonresident father reserves the "father" label for him only (Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

Results also indicate that teens who have a strained relationship with their mother are more likely to outright reject the stepfather label. Additionally, teens who felt closer with their mother were more likely to change from the "mother's husband" to "stepfather" label compared to continuing to use the "mother's husband" label. This suggests that while some adolescents may resist the stepfather label, those who feel close to their mother may be more willing to reconsider this, or those who feel less close with their mother are less likely to change what they label their stepfather. This lends support to research that suggests mothers

play a pivotal role in fostering adjustment in stepfamilies and the formation of a close stepfather-stepchild bond (King, 2009). Positive relations with mothers may facilitate adjustment within stepfamilies (Heterington & Jodl, 1994) and a move towards youths' acceptance of their stepfather as a "father" figure, whereas adolescents with less close ties with their mother may find it more difficult to adjust to stepfamily life in this way and might never accept the "stepfather" label.

Results also suggest that adolescents' relationships with their mothers and nonresident fathers are more strongly associated with stepfather labeling than how close they feel to their stepfathers. This suggests that the process of stepfather labeling is sensitive to the broader family system and youths' sense of closeness with their biological parents. Additionally, referring to their stepfather as their "mother's husband" does not simply reflect a less close stepfather-stepchild bond. How close an adolescent feels to his or her stepfather is not associated with the way they label him; defining this person to others as their "stepfather" or their "mother's husband" has little to do with the strength of this bond. Therefore, while labels may convey to outsiders some notion of the nature of this relationship (Galvin, 2006), it appears that the stepfather label has less to do with describing the quality of the relationship between the stepchild and stepfather, and more to do with what the label means within the broader family system.

Other characteristics of the stepfamily environment are also associated with the labeling process. The longer a teen has been living in a stepfamily, the more likely they are to adopt the stepfather label. This result confirms past research, and indicates that the longer a stepfamily is together the more likely youth are to consider their stepfather as playing a "father" role. The presence of other siblings also appears to promote the stepfather label, with both stepsiblings and full siblings increasing the odds that adolescents consistently use the stepfather label compared to delaying its use or using the mothers husband label, respectively. Older teens were also more likely to retreat from the stepfather label, perhaps signaling developmental shifts in the nature of the stepfather-stepchild relationship.

Finally, results indicate that economic resources (income) are associated with greater use of the stepfather label relative to the mother's husband label, while higher maternal education is associated with higher odds of rejecting the stepfather label by retreating from using it or consistently using the mother's husband label. These results suggest that some resources, such as income, may promote the use of the stepfather label among teens. As stepchild-stepparent relationship development is a function, in part, of positive evaluations by the stepchild of contributions from the stepparent (Ganong et al., 2011), perhaps enhanced family income is seen as a positive benefit stemming from the stepparent that helps foster the use of the stepfather label. On the other hand, other socioeconomic resources, such as maternal education, may enable teens to challenge such labels. Teens with more highly educated mothers may possess a greater confidence to question (e.g. Lareau, 2003) and perhaps challenge the label of "stepfather" more so than youth with less educated mothers.

The current study extends prior research by using a nationally representative sample to empirically examine factors that are associated with how adolescents use labels to describe their stepfathers and assess how stable these labels are. Much of the prior research on the

labeling process has been qualitative in nature. The current study, informed by this work, uses a sample of teens in stepfamilies to examine the association of several factors with the labeling process. Results from this study open up new questions for qualitative research to further untangle the meaning of labels and the role of parents in this process. Furthermore, much of the limited research on stepfather labeling has focused on the stepfather experience of hearing their stepchildren call them “dad”. The current study focuses on the adolescent experience, to understand youths’ perspective on how they label their stepfather. Study results help deepen our understanding of the factors that are associated with adolescents’ perspective of the nature of their bond with their stepfathers.

Although this study contributes to the existing literature by examining, in a longitudinal framework, several important predictors of stepfather labeling, a number of limitations exist. Due to an incorrect skip pattern in the Add Health survey administration, adolescents who listed having a “mother’s husband” in their household were excluded from answering any questions about the quality of their relationship at Wave I. Therefore, our measure of stepfather-stepchild closeness was taken from Wave II. While this measure appears to be relatively stable, it would be better to measure it from the beginning of the observation. Future research should continue to examine the association between labeling behavior and various dimensions of the stepfather-stepchild relationship. Additionally, the current study is limited to examining the labeling process only among adolescents in married stepfamilies. Given substantial differences in family life (e.g., Manning & Lamb, 2003), and the higher rates of boundary ambiguity among adolescents in cohabiting stepfamilies (Brown & Manning, 2009) future research should examine how the stepfamily labeling process plays out among teens from cohabiting stepfamilies.

Finally, because our time span of observation is fairly short and did not begin at the very start of stepfamily formation, groups that we consider being “consistent” in their labeling may have changed labels in the past or will change in the future. Given the amount of change in labels we see here, with many established stepfamilies in our sample, we can’t assume the labeling process is static. Future research should look at the process of stepfather labeling over a longer time span, capturing information from the start of the stepfather-stepchild relationship to examine how much change occurs in labeling over time and across different age groups. Additionally, research should investigate stepfather labeling at more closely spaced intervals and in different settings in order to better capture the dynamic nature of label changes and the stability of label choices.

With the growing complexity in family life, the process of assigning kinship labels has become both more involved and perhaps more central to family identity building. It has been over twenty years now since Furstenberg and Cherlin’s (1991) research on stepfamilies first asked the important question “who’s in your family?”. Since that time researchers in social psychology, communication studies, family studies, and sociology have continued to discuss the salient role of labels and kinship terms for stepfamily dynamics and identity development. This study examines the roots of this labeling process, and finds that several dimensions of an adolescent’s family network are relevant for whether or not they feel they live with a “stepfather” or their “mother’s husband.” Findings suggest that these labeling

choices have less to do with the quality of the stepfather-stepchild relationship, and more to do with what's going on within the broader family system and ties to biological parents.

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Table 1

Descriptive Information about Stepfather Labeling Groups (Means & %'s)

	Consistently Stepfather (1)	Delayed Stepfather (2)	Retreat from Stepfather Label (3)	Consistently Mother's Husband (4)	Differences <i>p</i> < .05
Female (%)	51.3	50.4	48.3	44.5	1 > 4
Race (%)					
Hispanic	11.5	14.4	11.5	12.4	
White	71.5	77.9	70.9	74.8	2 > 1,3
Black	10.3	7.1	11.5	11.0	1, 3 > 2
Age	14.92 (0.14)	15.07 (0.30)	15.27 (0.19)	14.89 (0.25)	2,3 > 1,4; 3 > 2
Mother's Education (%)					
Less than High School	14.4	22.6	7.1	6.7	2 > 1,3,4; 1 > 3,4
High School	35.2	32.1	25.8	35.7	1,2,4 > 3
Some College	32.7	29.2	38.6	33.7	3 > 1,2
Bachelor's or more	17.8	16.2	28.4	23.8	3,4 > 1,2
Income (in thousands of dollars)	48.45 (2.55)	45.11 (4.50)	56.04 (7.16)	40.1 (4.04)	3 > 1,2,4; 1,2 > 4
Years in Stepfamily	8.00 (0.23)	6.64 (0.53)	6.74 (0.53)	5.65 (0.43)	1 > 2,3,4; 2,3 > 4
Number of full siblings	0.74 (0.05)	0.81 (0.16)	0.66 (0.10)	0.55 (0.10)	2>1,3,4; 1 >3,4; 3>4
Number of half siblings	0.67 (0.04)	0.75 (0.13)	0.59 (0.09)	0.50 (0.09)	2>1,3,4; 1 >3,4; 3>4
Number of step siblings	0.24 (0.04)	0.10 (0.04)	0.10 (0.05)	0.14 (0.05)	1 > 2,3,4
Number of prior father figures	1.92 (0.04)	2.06 (0.08)	2.01 (0.06)	2.03 (0.10)	2,3,4 > 1
Birth was marital (%)	74.3	79.8	82.4	79.0	2,3 > 1
Closeness with Mother	4.50 (0.02)	4.50 (0.05)	4.43 (0.05)	4.28 (0.11)	1,2 > 3,4; 3 > 4
Closeness with Non-Resident Biological Father	2.41 (0.09)	2.98 (0.22)	3.04 (0.18)	3.21 (0.31)	2,3,4 > 1; 4 > 2,3
Closeness with Stepfather, Wave II	3.86 (0.04)	3.95 (0.07)	3.78 (0.11)	3.76 (0.09)	2 > 1,3,4; 1 > 3,4
N	826	147	132	87	

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses; Means are weighted and standard errors adjust for weighting, clustering, and stratification. Significant differences between means highlighted in the 6th column are based on t-tests.

Table 2
Multinomial Logistic Regression Models predicting Stepfather Labeling Group (Odds Ratios)

(Reference Category)	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	Delayed Stepfather	Retreat from Stepfather Label (vs. Consistently Stepfather)	Consistently Mother's Husband	Retreat from Stepfather Label (vs. Delayed Stepfather)	Consistently Mother's Husband	Retreat from Stepfather Label (vs. Consistently Mother's Husband)	Consistently Mother's Husband	Retreat from Stepfather Label (vs. Consistently Mother's Husband)	Consistently Mother's Husband
Female	1.113 (0.26)	1.266 (0.28)	1.373 (0.27)	1.137 (0.34)	1.234 (0.35)	1.085 (0.36)			
Race ^a									
Hispanic	1.065 (0.38)	1.603 (0.42)	1.551 (0.47)	1.505 (0.49)	1.456 (0.56)	0.968 (0.54)			
Black	0.620 (0.41)	1.262 (0.34)	0.948 (0.46)	2.036 (0.48)	1.530 (0.53)	0.751 (0.51)			
Other	0.089 *** (0.73)	0.980 (0.50)	0.352 (0.87)	11.056 ** (0.78)	3.975 (1.12)	0.359 (1.02)			
Age	1.160 (0.10)	1.221 * (0.09)	1.083 (0.10)	1.052 (0.14)	0.936 (0.14)	0.889 (0.11)			
Mother's Education ^b									
High school	0.635 (0.38)	1.473 (0.46)	2.792 (0.64)	2.321 (0.48)	4.397 * (0.70)	1.895 (0.78)			
Some College	0.588 (0.35)	2.221 (0.48)	2.904 (0.72)	3.773 * (0.53)	4.933 * (0.76)	1.308 (0.85)			
Bachelor's or more	0.563 (0.44)	2.764 * (0.51)	3.320 (0.70)	4.909 ** (0.56)	5.918 * (0.75)	1.206 (0.84)			
Income (logged)	0.990 (0.16)	1.080 (0.15)	0.775 * (0.12)	1.091 (0.21)	0.783 (0.19)	0.717 (0.18)			
Years in Stepfamily	0.922 ** (0.03)	0.937 * (0.03)	0.885 ** (0.04)	1.016 (0.04)	0.960 (0.05)	0.945 (0.05)			
# of full siblings	1.101 (0.17)	0.837 (0.16)	0.656 * (0.20)	0.760 (0.25)	0.595 (0.26)	0.785 (0.23)			
# of half siblings	1.273 (0.13)	1.021 (0.14)	0.931 (0.18)	0.802 (0.18)	0.731 (0.20)	0.912 (0.23)			
# of step siblings	0.572 * (0.23)	0.555 (0.35)	0.648 (0.27)	0.971 (0.41)	1.133 (0.28)	1.166 (0.41)			
# of prior father figures	1.179 (0.20)	1.001 (0.20)	1.041 (0.29)	0.850 (0.26)	0.883 (0.33)	1.039 (0.34)			
Birth was marital	0.975 (0.39)	1.230 (0.38)	0.816 (0.57)	1.260 (0.47)	0.836 (0.63)	0.664 (0.64)			
Closeness with Mother	1.052 (0.22)	0.883 (0.21)	0.537 * (0.27)	0.839 (0.26)	0.510 * (0.28)	0.608 (0.32)			
Closeness with Non-Resident Biological Father	1.249 ** (0.08)	1.254 * (0.09)	1.341 * (0.13)	1.005 (0.12)	1.074 (0.15)	1.069 (0.16)			
Closeness with Stepfather, Wave II	1.155 (0.14)	0.997 (0.16)	1.053 (0.17)	0.86 (0.19)	0.91 (0.19)	1.06 (0.20)			

	<u>Model 1</u>	<u>Model 2</u>	<u>Model 3</u>
(Reference Category)	Retreat from Stepfather Label Delayed Stepfather	Retreat from Stepfather Label Consistently Mother's Husband (vs. Delayed Stepfather)	Consistently Mother's Husband (vs. Retreat from Stepfather Label)
	(vs. Consistently Stepfather)		
	N = 1192		

Note: Standard Errors are in parentheses;

* p < 0.05,

** p < 0.01,

*** p < 0.001; F(18, 13211.4) = 2.74, p < 0.001; Results are weighted and adjust for clustering and stratification.

^aWhite is reference group,

^bLess than High school is reference group