

**THE PROCESSES DISTINGUISHING STABLE FROM UNSTABLE STEPFAMILY COUPLES:  
A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS<sup>12</sup>**

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**INTRODUCTION**

In the United States, it is estimated that more than two thirds of women and three quarters of men remarry after divorce (Schoen & Standish, 2001). These second marriages often involve children: it is estimated that 7.2% of American children under age 18 live with a biological parent and stepparent (Kreider, 2008). These data underestimate the number of children who live with a stepparent since they do not take into account cohabiting stepfamilies or situations where children are living part-time with a stepparent (Saint-Jacques & Drapeau, 2008; Stewart, 2001). Furthermore, second marriages are known to be more fragile than first marriages: in the United States, 40% of remarriages occurring between 1985 and 1994 ended in permanent separation or divorce within ten years, as compared with 32% of first marriages (Bumpass & Raley, 2007). In Canada, nationally representative surveys show that the probability that the parents of children born into stepfamilies would separate before the children were ten

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<sup>1</sup> For more details, see Saint-Jacques, M.-C., et al. (2011). The processes distinguishing stable from unstable stepfamily couples. *Family Relations*, 60: 545-561.

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years old is three times higher than for children born into intact two-parent families (Juby, Le Bourdais & Marcil-Gratton, 2001). When a family's path comprises several consecutive transitions and if the associated stress factors reoccur, the capacity of the adults and children to adjust is often negatively affected (Brody & Neubaum, 1996; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Saint-Jacques, Cloutier, Pauzé, Simard & Poulin, 2006). For example, repeated family transitions affect children's emotional stability, daily functioning, and adaptation, as well as the adults' parenting abilities (Hao & Xie, 2002; Hetherington, 1991). Despite the fact that there is a greater risk that stepfamilies will separate – with the negative consequences that entails – little research has been conducted on this topic (Desrosiers, Le Bourdais & Laplante, 2000; Teachman, 2008).

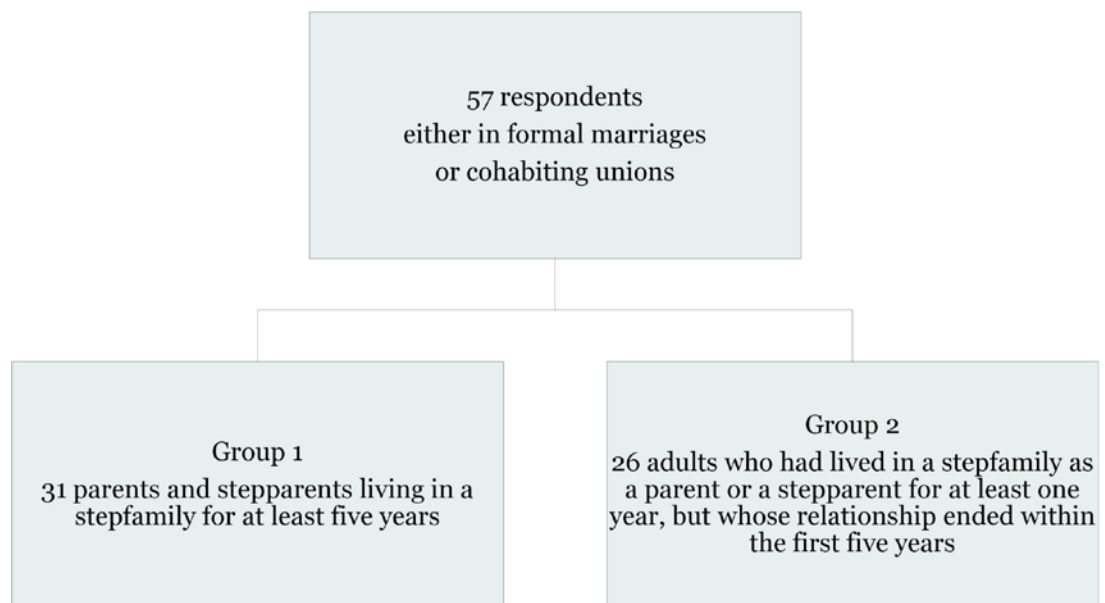
In order to better understand the factors that contribute to this fragility, a qualitative study was conducted comparing the experiences of parents and stepparents living in stepfamilies to those of adults who were part of a stepfamily that separated. The study had two objectives: 1) explore the similarities and differences in the stepfamily experience of these two groups; 2) understand the processes associated with stepfamilies which contributed to intact or terminated relationships. Our study was particularly innovative in that it focused on processes, adopted a comparative intra-stepfamily perspective, and attempted to better understand stepfamilies through the eyes of those directly involved. Studies such as ours are rare in stepfamily research, even though numerous experts have stressed that they are essential if we are to arrive at a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying these families' development (Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000). Up until now, studies have been limited to identifying: (a) sociodemographic risks that leave little room for intervention (Saint-Jacques et al., 2009); and (b) personal, cultural, or interpersonal factors that explain, in part at least, the greater instability of stepfamilies (Ganong, Coleman & Hans, 2006). The approach used here made it possible to compare the two groups so as to identify elements that shed light on a given phenomenon. This approach was employed to increase our data's potential for generalization by showing that the observed events and processes were

not simple idiosyncrasies and, indeed, that they heightened the explanatory strength of the analysis (Charbonneau, 1991; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Rihoux & Ragin, 2009). The nature of the comparisons conducted here has considerable potential for practitioner intervention by making it possible to target factors that support or hinder stepfamily stability.

### **OBJECTIVES**

- Explore the similarities and differences in the stepfamily experience of parents and stepparents living in stepfamily to those of adults who were part of a stepfamily that separated;
- Understand the processes associated with stepfamilies which contributed to intact or terminated relationships.

### **METHOD**

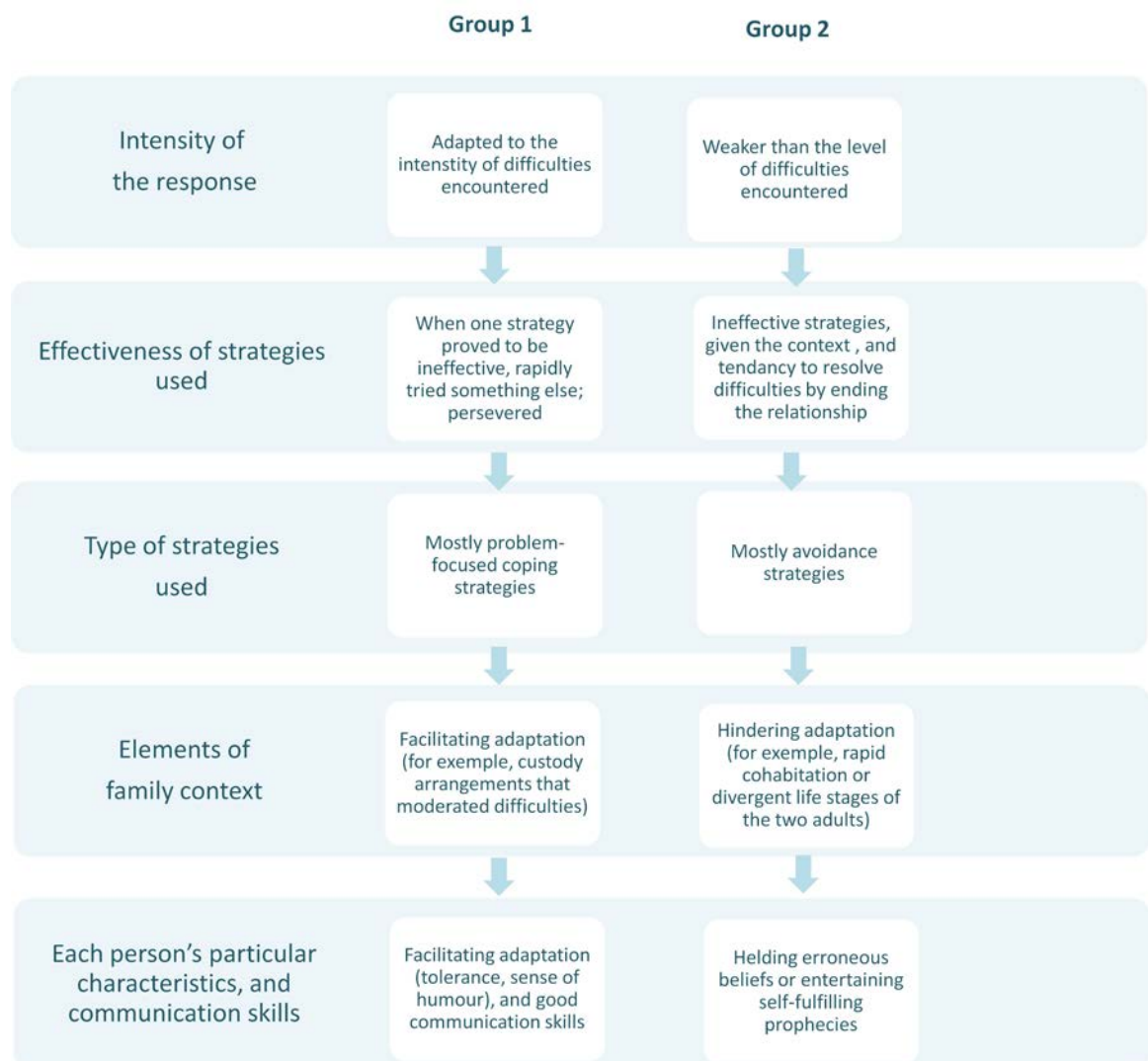


### **Data analysis**

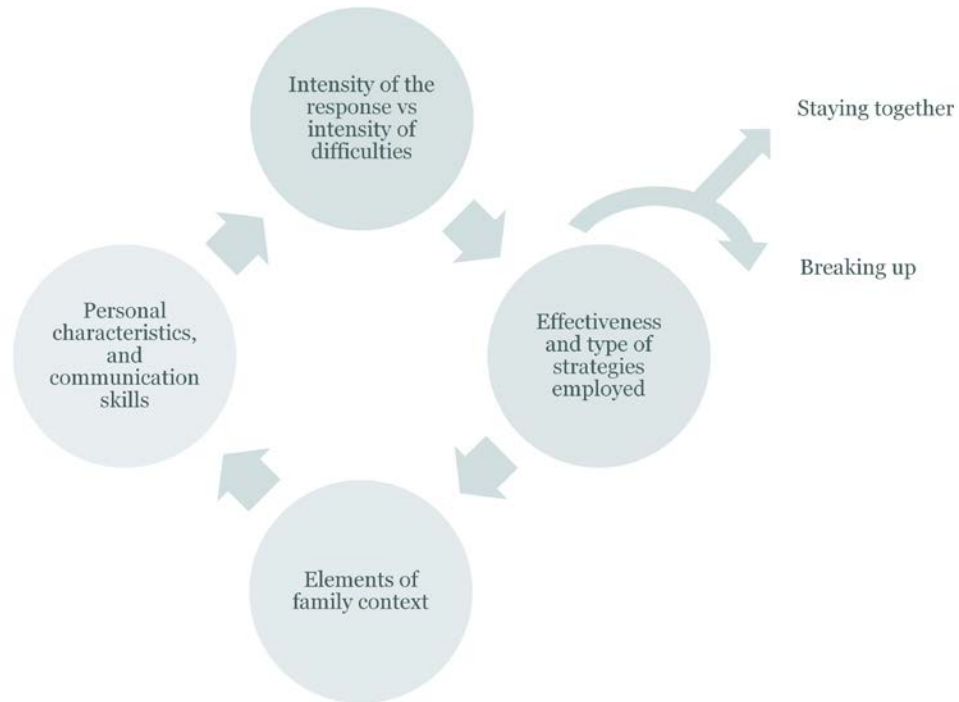
- The data of this qualitative research were gathered using open-ended, biographical interviews and analyzed using a general inductive approach.

## RESULTS

- Generally speaking, the results reflected similarities between the participants from the two groups in terms of the nature, number, and intensity of the difficulties experienced.
- These observations showed that it was not the number, intensity, or nature of the difficulties in isolation that explained union outcome.
- In fact, the instability of some stepfamily couples could be explained less by the challenges encountered than by the way they cope with difficulties, more precisely the intensity of the strategies put into place to cope with the difficulties, the type of strategies used, and their respective effectiveness.
- **Elements distinguishing stepfamilies that stay together and those that broke up**



- Family context elements as well as more personal elements contributed significantly to decisions about whether to stay together or to separate, either by moderating the intensity of the difficulties or by exacerbating tension that was already present in the family
- **Staying together or not: Interacting factors**



## CONCLUSION

- This qualitative study was particularly innovative in that it focused on processes, and adopted a comparative intra-stepfamily perspective.
- Results revealed that the instability of some stepfamilies could be explained less by the challenges encountered than by the processes that were or were not employed to meet these challenges.
- Results showed that diverse elements of family context, as well as personal characteristics played an important role in the outcome of union.

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