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# STEPFAMILY DISSOLUTION: WHY?

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In partnership with the Québec Association of single parent and stepfamilies  
(FAFMRQ)

**New Family Forms following Family Dissolution:  
Consequences in/on Postmodern Society  
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# Prevalence

- $\frac{2}{3}$  of women and  $\frac{3}{4}$  of men in the United States remarry after divorce (Schoen & Standish, 2001)
- These second marriages often involve children: 7.2% of American children under the age of 18 live with a biological parent and a stepparent (Kreider, 2008)
- In Québec, 11% of households with children are stepfamilies (Ministry for the Family and Seniors, 2011).
- Similar rates are observed in many European countries, including France and the United Kingdom (Vivas, 2009; Office for National Statistics, 2005).
- In 2002, 6.3 % of Belgian couples were in stepfamily households (Petit & Casman, 2008).

**IN 2012, IN BOTH NORTH AMERICA AND EUROPE, THERE ARE A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF ADULTS AND CHILDREN LIVING IN STEPFAMILY HOUSEHOLDS**

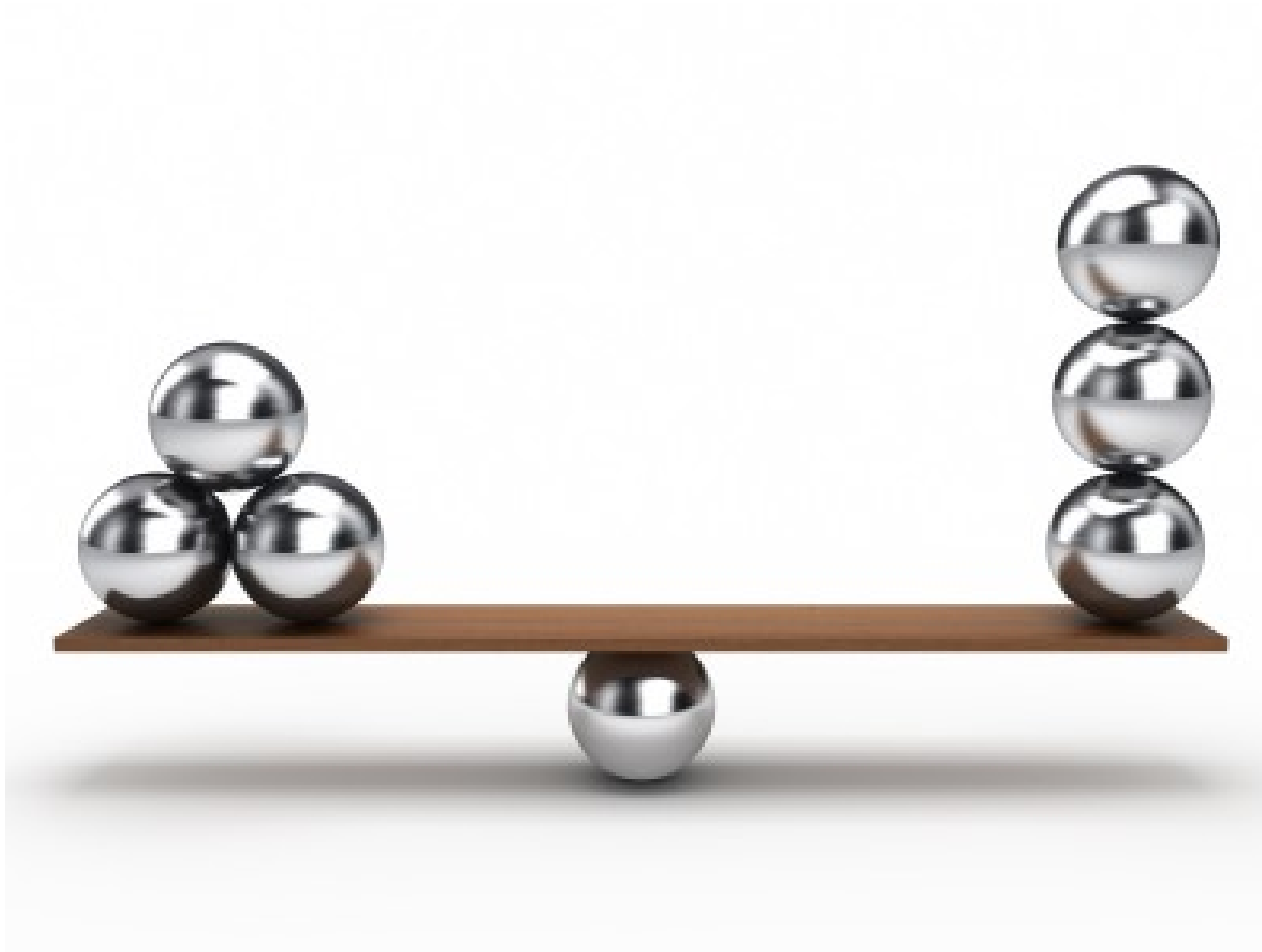
# Issue

- Second marriages are known to be more vulnerable to breakdown than first marriages
- In the United States, 40% of remarriages that occurred 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, the probability that the parents of children born into stepfamilies would separate before the children were ten years old is three times higher than for children born into intact two-parent families (Juby, Le Bourdais & Marcil-Gratton, 2001).
- **WHEN A FAMILY EXPERIENCES SEVERAL CONSECUTIVE TRANSITIONS AND THE ASSOCIATED STRESS FACTORS RECUR, THE CAPACITY OF THE ADULTS AND CHILDREN TO ADJUST IS OFTEN NEGATIVELY AFFECTED** (Brody & Neubaum, 1996; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Saint-Jacques et al., 2006; 2009).

# Research questions

1. Which processes in the establishment of the new stepfamily later contributed to its breakdown?
2. Are there observable links between respondents' family-of-origin experiences and their previous marital relationships and stepfamily breakdowns?
3. Can we identify major events or defining moments associated with the separation of the stepfamily couple?

# Stability in stepfamilies – What do we know?



# Theoretical framework: life course perspective

- Constitutes a general and comprehensive framework for the analysis of **individual development**, to explain links between social change, social structures and individual action
- Focuses on **developmental processes**, **biographical trajectories** and the **interfaces** between individuals and their socio-historical context
- Calls for a **dynamic** and **contextual approach** to studying the experiences of families in transition
- Puts strong emphasis on the **significance individuals attach** to events that occurred in their trajectory.

- Examines the life paths of the people involved by breaking those paths down into different “trajectories” (family, educational, professional and residential), each of them marked by a range of events and transitions
- The study of transitions is crucial to this theoretical perspective as it provides a valuable starting point for a dynamic examination of respondents’ life paths.
- Focusing on trajectories helps avoid falling into the trap of separating people’s stepfamily situations from their overall life course.

## Our focus: 2 key concepts of life course theory

- **Human agency:** Even in the same situation, people tend to act differently because they interpret that situation differently
- **Linked lives:** People function in multi-relational social networks where socio-historical factors also come into play. People have interdependent relationships. Their past histories shed light on what they are experiencing today



# Methods

Qualitative design; comparative, retrospective and cross-sectional approach

## ○ Sample

- 57 parents and/or stepparents:
  - 31 have lived in a stepfamily household for 5 years or more
  - 26 lived in a stepfamily household for between 1 and 5 years and separated

## ○ Data collection

- semi-structured interviews
- timetable of transitions: familial, educational/professional, residential trajectories
- demographic survey

## ○ Analysis

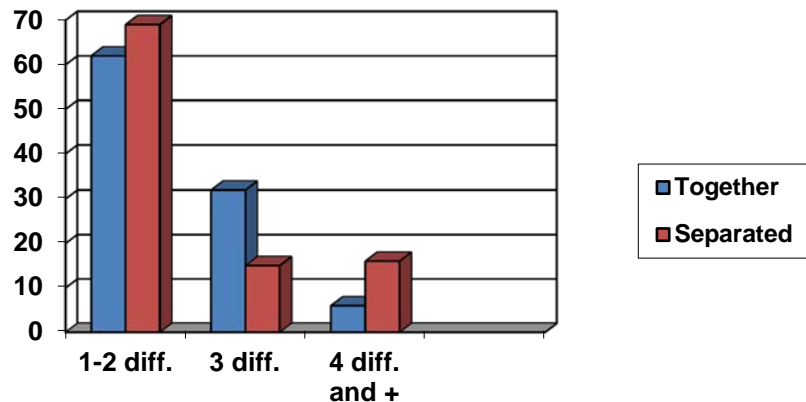
- thematic content analysis (Bardin, 1993)
- developing matrices (Huberman & Miles, 2003; Rihoux & Ragin, 2009)

## Sociodemographic characteristics of participants (N=57)

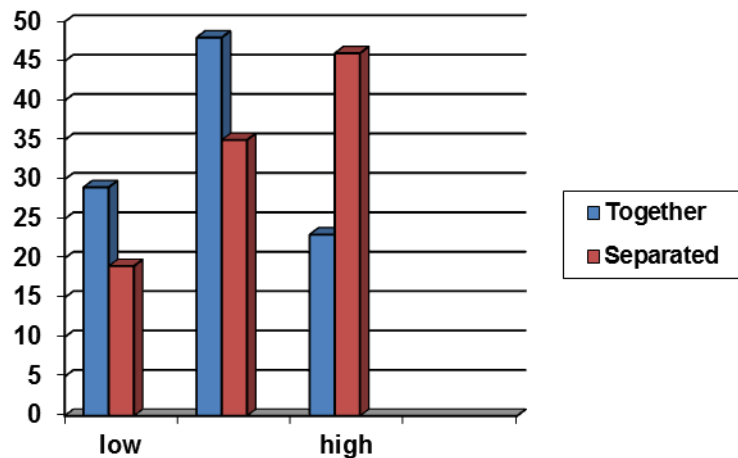
- Sex
  - Male: 18 (31.6%)
  - Female: 39 (68.4%)
- Age:

X = 43 years (Min. 24.1; Max. 62.1)
- Annual family income
  - < \$24,999: 2 (3.6%)
  - \$25,000– \$39,999: 3 (5.4%)
  - \$40,000 – \$59,999: 4 (7.1%)
  - \$60,000 – \$69,999: 6 (10.7%)
  - \$70,000 or more: 41 (73.2%)
- Education
  - High school: 4 (7.0%)
  - College: 17 (29.8%)
  - University: 36 (63.2%)
- Participant status
  - Parent : 19 (33.4%)
  - Stepparent: 6 (10.6%)
  - Dual status: 32 (56.1%)
- Stepfamily type
  - Stepmother: 9 (15.8%)
  - Stepfather: 7 (12.3%)
  - Complex: 41 (71.9%)

# 1- Which processes in the establishment of the new stepfamily later contributed to its breakdown?



- All respondents recognized there had been difficulties
- More of the separated respondents identified a higher number of problems ( $\geq 4$ ) and problems described as major
- Enough counter-examples exist to show that the number, severity or nature of problems are not the sole predictors of stepfamily success or breakdown



# How do respondents from each group deal with their problems?

	Links between intensity of problem and intensity of response	Strategies used and effectiveness
<b>Group 1</b> Stepfamilies still together	Intensity of response <b>APPROPRIATE</b> to intensity of difficulties  Use of a variety of strategies	Primarily problem-centered Effective
<b>Group 2</b> Separated stepfamilies	Intensity of response <b>LOWER</b> than intensity of problems	Primarily avoidance-centered Or, if problem-centered

E.g., like sitting down with the partner to discuss the problem

E.g., avoiding discussing conflictual issues or walking away

## 2a- Are there observable links between respondents' family-of-origin experiences and stepfamily breakdowns?

- Troubled childhood, marked by parental conflict and conjugal and family violence
  - Breakdowns occur when respondents who experience similar problems in the stepfamily refuse to let their own children suffer in the same way
- Marked differences between a person's childhood family experiences and their experiences in the stepfamily
  - Breakdowns occur as a result of cultural or value conflicts in the stepcouple relationship

## 2b- Are there observable links between respondents' **previous marital relationships** and stepfamily breakdowns?

- Respondents do not believe that relationships between couples can last
  - Breakdowns occur when problems arise
- Respondents have entered the current stepfamily relationship, or a previous one, without thinking it through
  - Breakdowns occur when the other partner fails to meet a respondent's expectations
- Respondents focus significantly more on their parental role and neglect the couple relationship
  - Breakdowns occur when one partner is unhappy with the other's failure to invest in the couple relationship

### **3- Can we identify major events or defining moments associated with the separation of the stepfamily couple?**

- **In 20 situations out of 26, it was possible to identify major events associated with the breakdown of the couple**
- **Areas involved**
  - Work-related or financial issues (e.g.: new job, purchase of a home)
  - Conjugal (e.g.: lack of support, temporary breakup, infidelity)
  - Family-related (e.g.: parental behaviour; changes to child custody arrangements, behavioural problems in a child)
- **Role of such events in the couple's trajectory**
  - Defining moments marking the start of a slippery slope that will lead to a breakdown
  - “The straw that breaks the camel's back”, an event that precipitates the end of an already shaky relationship

# Why is it that these events lead to the breakdown of the stepfamily couple?

- Because they:
  - Function as chronic stressors that weaken the couple's relationship
  - Create occasions for respondents see sides to their partners that they discover they don't really like
  - Expose a partner's lack of commitment or desire to take the relationship further
  - Make a partner feel left out or deprived of a meaningful role to play
  - Bring parents to realize that their children are not happy in the stepfamily situation
  - Create imbalances in the roles and responsibilities played within the family



# Conclusion: How can we explain stepfamily dissolution?



## What do we learn from a comparison of the two groups?

All stepfamilies experience problems at one moment or other in their life path

Families that separate encounter no problems specific only to them

They do however experience more problems and their problems are more severe

The critical element that seems to make the difference between stepfamilies that last and those that break down is **the way in which families approached problems and the strategies they employed to try and solve problems.**

## What do we learn from a dynamic reading of the life paths of stepcouples who separated ?

### The importance of their past history (linked lives):

Half of the separated respondents had difficult childhoods and refused to let their own children suffer in the same way

The disparity was too great between their childhood family experiences and their stepfamily experience

Patterns are repeated from one conjugal relationship to another but all have some kind of basis in the degree of commitment to the conjugal relationship (1/3 of situations)

## What do we learn from a reading of the major events in the life trajectories of stepcouples who separated?

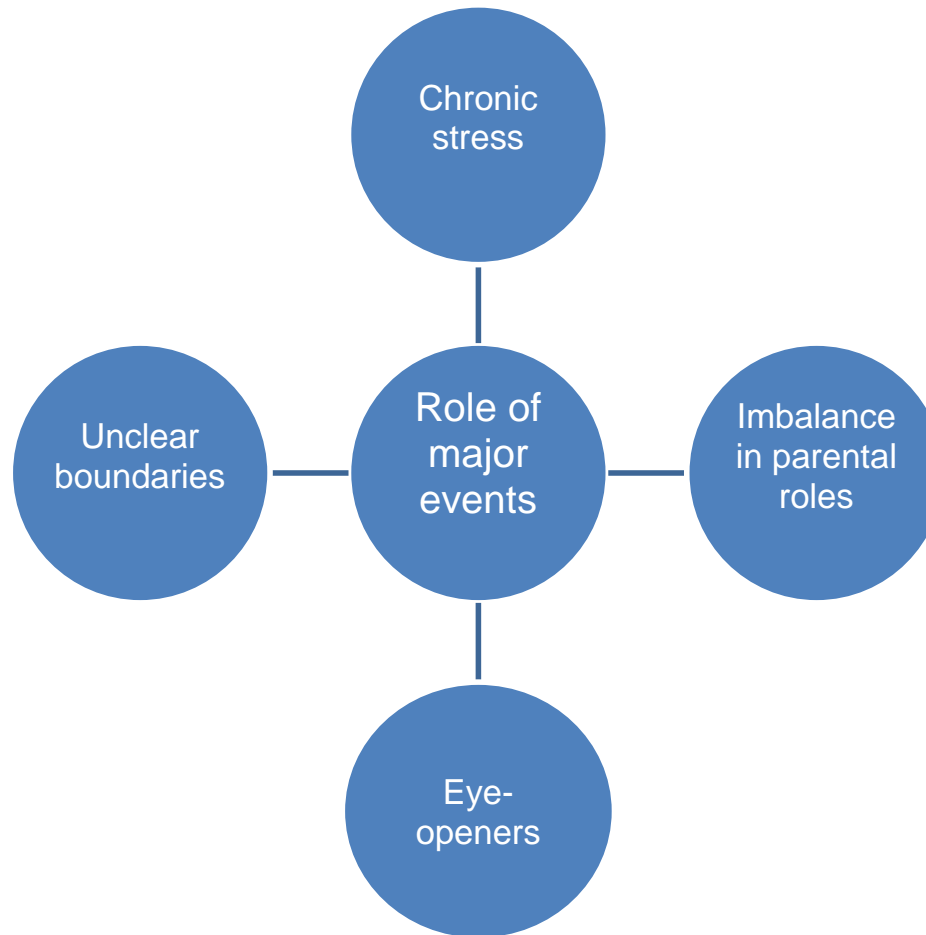
The interdependence of the family, residential and professional trajectories in respondents' life paths

Many of the events that brought about the breakdown of the couple are not particular to stepfamilies

When they are, they arise mainly from the parent – child – step-parent triangle. Parents tend to align themselves with their children in conflict situations

Major events can lead to a breakdown in a relationship because they mark the start of a slippery slope or act as “the straw that breaks the camel’s back”

## Why do major events produce breakdowns in relationships?



# Study limitations and strengths

- Approach was retrospective and cross-sectional
- Over-representation of female, well-educated, economically well-off respondents
- Analysis was fundamentally interpretative
- Viewpoints were partial: only one respondent per family and participants had not yet reached the end of their life course;
- The number of respondents was significant and offered diversity and data saturation
- Use of a variety of methods of data analysis helped to ensure validity of results and allow replication of the study (double coding; searches for counterexamples, blinded coding, matrix construction)

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