Stepfamilies in Germany: New Insights on Partnership Formation and Living Circumstances from AID:A

Valerie Heintz-Martin & Christine Entleitner

Theoretical Background

Stepfamilies are still often characterized as an “incomplete institution” (Cherlin, 1978) and seen as very different from intact families.

Reasons:
- The lack of norms makes it difficult for each member to know how to behave.
- Stepparenthood is an achieved status and not an ascribed one.
- There is a lack of role models for the members living in a stepfamily this can lead to role ambiguity.
- It is difficult for stepfamilies to establish a “family common sense”.

Research Questions

- How are stepfamilies compared to other families?
- What are the main differences between the family types?
- What type of union is more prevalent? What are the differences in partners?
- How are the socioeconomic conditions of families?
- What are the main strains families live today?
- How is the family life organized?

Definition of Family Types

- Intact family: Two biological parents
- Lone parent family: Single parent with child(ren)
- Stepfather family: A father with his biological children and a stepmother
- Stepmother family: A mother with her biological children and a stepfather
- Stepmother and stepfather family: A mother with her biological children and a stepfather + common children
- Blended stepmother family: A father with his biological children and a stepmother + common children
- Blended stepfather family: A mother with her biological children and a stepfather + common children
- Blended stepmother and stepfather family: A mother with her biological children and a stepfather + common children

Data and Method

- Survey Growing up in Germany (AID:A), 2009
- Cross sectional survey with a large sample (25,339); detailed information on household composition, respondents' family of origin, and socioeconomic characteristics
- Sample size: 3,677, analyze based on weighted data
- Descriptive analyses on family characteristics
- Analyses of variance

Findings

Table 1: Distribution (in %) of families with children < 22 by family type, according to the age of youngest child, duration of union, age at entering into the union and employment status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of youngest child in household (N=3,270)</th>
<th>0-5 years</th>
<th>6-11 years</th>
<th>12 and older</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intact</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepfather</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>55.8</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepmother</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>54.1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepfather and stepmother</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>41.2</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Regional differences in the distribution of families with children < 22, according to the type of family and type of union (N=3,677)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>West Germany</th>
<th>East Germany</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of stepfamilies among two-parent families with children</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of two-parent families with children living in common law unions</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of stepfamilies living in common law unions</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>42.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Analysis of variance: Quality of family life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Family type</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Ela</th>
<th>Effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Happiness in Partnership</td>
<td>Family type</td>
<td>0.670</td>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.401</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>no effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict in Partnership</td>
<td>Family type</td>
<td>5.091</td>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>happier</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Analysis of variance: Quality of family life

Conclusions

- The number of stepfamilies is not as high as often assumed.
- Stepfatherfamilies are the most frequent stepfamily type.
- Compared to intact families, stepfamilies live more often in common law unions, especially in East Germany.
- Family climate appears minimal higher among intact families, whereas conflicts in partnership have higher average values in blended stepfamilies.
- The family types follow the same patterns with regard to demographic characteristics.