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Boundary Ambiguity in Stepfamilies

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Family boundary ambiguity refers to a lack of clarity as to who is in and who is out of the family system. Few studies have examined this concept in the stepfamily context, which is problematic because such definitional problems hinder our understanding of close relationships in stepfamilies. Based on a nationally representative sample of first-married, remarried, and cohabiting couples with minor children, this study investigates the prevalence and nature of boundary ambiguity in stepfamilies (families that include children from previous unions) and the relationship between boundary ambiguity and couples' relationship quality and stability. Results suggest that boundary ambiguity is much more prevalent in stepfamilies than original two-parent families and that boundary ambiguity is associated with the structure of the stepfamily. Boundary ambiguity is negatively associated with the quality of the couple's relationship and stability of the union, but only from the perspective of wives and female partners.

Keywords: *family boundary ambiguity; stepfamilies; relationship quality; remarriage*

Family boundary ambiguity refers to a lack of clarity as to who is in and who is out of the family system (Boss & Greenberg, 1984). Boundary ambiguity has been studied in contexts in which the loss or addition of a family member is sudden or vague—among missing-in-action (MIA) families, infertile couples, and the caregivers of Alzheimer's patients, to name a few (Boss, 1977, 1980b; Boss, Caron, Horbal, & Mortimer, 1990; Burns, 1987). Similarly, family boundary ambiguity is expected to be high among remarried couples that blend children from different parent-child dyads (Boss, 1980a). Few studies have examined boundary ambiguity in stepfamilies, however. This is a serious omission because a lack of clarity with respect to family membership is associated with family stress, dysfunctional relationships, and depression (Boss, 1977, 1980a; Boss et al., 1990; Burns, 1987). Considering the greater risk of divorce among

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remarried than first-married couples (Booth & Edwards, 1992) and the positive association between marital quality and children's adjustment in stepfamilies (albeit to a more limited extent than in first-married families; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Rogers, 1996), it is important to examine factors that may influence marital dynamics in remarriage. Ganong and Coleman (1994) pointed out that family definition problems complicate scientific investigations and hinder knowledge of close relationships in stepfamilies, which currently lags behind knowledge of close relationships in normative family structures. Yet no study has directly examined family boundary ambiguity in stepfamilies at the national level.

Drawing on the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH; Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988), the current study investigated boundary ambiguity in stepfamilies (defined as first-married, remarried, and cohabiting couples with children from prior unions) and has three central goals. First, I assessed the proportion of American families, including stepfamilies, that have ambiguous family boundaries, measured as any discrepancy in spouses' reports of the children in the family. Research demonstrates relatively high levels of disagreement among couples in first marriages about the nature of their marriages (Gager & Sanchez, 2003); however, few studies have examined disagreements among couples in nontraditional family forms. Second, because stepfamily life is becoming increasingly complex (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000), I ascertained whether various structural factors are associated with boundary ambiguity in stepfamilies, including children's residence patterns, parents' and stepparents' sex, and the presence of shared children. Third, I evaluated the relationship between boundary ambiguity and couples' perceptions of relationship quality and stability. Fine and Kurdek (1994) suggested that consistency in stepfamily members' perceptions of family life is positively related to the quality of the marital relationship; however, few studies have tested this hypothesis empirically.

THE CONCEPT OF FAMILY BOUNDARY AMBIGUITY

The concept of family boundary ambiguity has its origins in family stress theory, which is concerned with how families respond to crises, called "stressor events." Developed by Boss in the 1970s, *family boundary ambiguity* refers to "a state when family members are uncertain in their *perception* of who is in or out of the family or who is performing what *roles and tasks* within the family system" (Boss, 1987, p. 709). Family

boundary ambiguity is ideally operationalized in terms of the congruence between the psychological and physical absence and presence of family members (Boss & Greenberg, 1984). Uncertainty with respect to family membership, especially over the long term, is thought to produce high levels of family stress, leading to eventual dysfunction (Boss & Greenberg, 1984). Although family boundary changes are considered normative and occur during the life span of any family (with the birth of a child, absences due to employment, death of a spouse, etc.), the sooner the ambiguity is resolved the more quickly the stress produced by the change should subside (Boss, 1980a).

BOUNDARY AMBIGUITY IN STEPFAMILIES

Stepfamilies have long been associated with ambiguous family boundaries and social roles because each family member may have a very different network of kin (Ahrons, 1979; Bohannon, 1970; Cherlin, 1978; Jacobson, 1987). Stepfamilies also lack many of the boundary-maintaining conditions typical in nuclear families, such as a common residence (Walker & Messinger, 1979). Trost (1993) argued that definitions of family are a matter of perspective and suggested that we define the family in terms of a system of variously meaningful (depending on the individual) dyadic units rather than a single, static entity.

Despite this research, only a few studies have examined stepfamily boundary ambiguity empirically. Moreover, children and adult children's definitions of the family have been studied more extensively than those of their parents, as children's definitions of the family may influence their ability to cope with family disruption and have implications for social support as they get older (e.g., Borduin, Mann, Cone, & Borduin, 1990; Furstenberg, 1987; Gross, 1987; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Smart, Neale, & Wade, 2001; White, 1998).

Although Boss (1987) referred to family boundary ambiguity, she typically measured the perceptions of an individual family member. Few studies compare differing definitions of the family within families and especially among couples. This is an unfortunate gap because research on first-married couples, whose social roles are much clearer than those in stepfamilies, demonstrates that a substantial minority of husbands or male partners and wives or female partners has different perceptions of what goes on in their marriages (Gager & Sanchez, 2003). Qualitative interviews reveal that definitions of family often differ between members (between parents and children and between siblings) of the same stepfamily

unit (Berger, 1998; Smart et al., 2001). On the other hand, research on a small sample of remarried, stepfather families indicates considerable agreement between spouses with respect to the stepparent role; however, this study did not examine spouses' definitions of family (Bray, Berger, & Boethel, 1995).

In the most notable study of boundary ambiguity in stepfamilies, Pasley (1987) examined perceptions of family membership in a small sample of remarried couples. Couples are considered to have ambiguous boundaries when there was disagreement between spouses with respect to the physical and/or psychological dimensions of family membership. Psychological boundary ambiguity was measured by asking each spouse to list the people that she or he considers family members, and physical boundary ambiguity was measured by asking spouses to list children and stepchildren living inside and outside the household. Couples were coded as having low or high ambiguity based on whether they listed the same children.

Pasley (1987) found that 40% of remarried couples exhibited high physical and/or psychological ambiguity. Boundary ambiguity was associated with the structure and complexity of the stepfamily. Ambiguous boundaries were most frequent when the husband or male partner had children from a previous union (as opposed to the wife or female partner), and when couples had complex parenting configurations, such as when spouses each had children from a previous union and a child together. This study (Pasley, 1987) is limited for understanding boundary ambiguity in contemporary stepfamilies, however. The small size of the sample made it impossible to disentangle the effect of (a) the sex of the biological parent from the residence of the child and (b) the presence of a shared child from the sheer number of parenting demands of the couple. First, research suggests greater ambiguity when children from prior unions live outside the household (Ambert, 1986; Fine, 1995; Greif, 1997; Hobart, 1988) and when the stepchildren are the biological children of husbands or male partners rather than wives or female partners; girls demonstrate a more sophisticated awareness of kinship roles than boys, and these differences may persist through adulthood (Borduin et al., 1990). It has become important to assess residence-of-child and gender-of-parent effects separately because more children are living with their fathers after divorce (Garasky & Meyer, 1996). In addition, whereas some work suggests that the birth of a shared child exacerbates role confusion hence increasing boundary ambiguity (Ambert, 1986; Fine, 1995), other evidence suggests that a shared child encourages family integration, which would decrease boundary ambiguity (Beer, 1992; Bernstein, 1989; Duberman, 1973; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; White, Brinkerhoff, & Booth, 1985). At the

same time, couples with stepchildren, especially those who have a shared child, face multiple parenting demands. Perhaps it is the sheer accumulation of parenting obligations, rather than the addition of a shared child, that is associated with uncertainty in family boundaries.

The Pasley (1987) study did not include cohabiting and first-married couples with children from previous unions. Boundary ambiguity may be higher in cohabiting than married stepfamilies. Cohabitation is associated with lower levels of commitment than marriage and greater ambiguity in social roles (Nock, 1995). It is important to consider whether either spouse has been previously married because the presence and involvement of a previous spouse may create boundary ambiguity in the current relationship (Madden-Derdich, Leonard, & Christopher, 1999). Moreover, there may be greater ambiguity between partners when one partner has been previously married as opposed to both. Family boundary ambiguity is also expected to decline the longer the couple has been together. Boundaries are particularly ambiguous at the beginning of the stepfamily cycle, becoming clearer over time (Papernow, 1993), although Furstenberg (1987) found that length of time in the stepfamily did not increase the likelihood that stepkin would be acknowledged.

Research suggests greater uncertainty about relationships with older than younger children (Fine, 1995; Marsiglio, 1992), and younger spouses may face greater uncertainty with respect to the children in the family than older children, especially if the gap in age between partners is large. The effect of race and ethnicity on boundary ambiguity in stepfamilies is unclear. African American families are associated with greater structural complexity, more permeable family boundaries, and more flexible social roles than White families as a result of social and economic stresses (Berger, 1998). Greater permeability of family boundaries among minorities may increase the odds that family members' definitions of family will clash. Conversely, less rigid family definitions may lower the likelihood of conflict. Family boundary ambiguity may be lower among stepfamilies with greater education and financial resources, as research shows higher quality relationships in stepfamilies of higher socioeconomic status (Duberman, 1973; Santrock & Sitterle, 1987).

BOUNDARY AMBIGUITY, RELATIONSHIP QUALITY, AND STABILITY

Ganong and Coleman (1994) suggested that adults' "cognitive conceptions of their family status have enormous pragmatic importance in the

day-to-day functioning of these families" (p. 8). Fine and Kurdek's (1994) multidimensional cognitive-developmental model views the stepfamily as a mutually influencing multiperson social unit and suggests that consistency in cognitions held by stepfamily members (e.g., the way that members of a stepfamily perceive common experiences) is positively related to relationship quality in various stepfamily subsystems (e.g., mother-stepfather, stepfather-stepchild) and overall stepfamily adjustment. Conflicting cognitions may increase the likelihood of misunderstandings, disappointment with one another's behavior, and resentment between family members. Thus, one partner's failure to recognize the other partner's children from a previous union as part of their family, arguably a conflict in cognitions between family members, may undermine the quality and stability of the relationship. Couples' relationship quality and stability is important to consider because husband or male partner and wives or female partners' negative perceptions of marital happiness, even if they disagree with one another, are positively associated with divorce (Gager & Sanchez, 2003).

It is well known that stepchildren increase the likelihood of divorce and negatively affect relationship quality among remarried couples (Booth & Edwards, 1992; White & Booth, 1985). No large-scale studies have examined how differing perceptions of children and definitions of family between partners affects marital relationships, although several studies based on small and nonrepresentative samples of stepfamilies suggest that incompatible and ambiguous perceptions of family membership negatively affect stepfamily functioning (Banker & Gaertner, 1998; Fast & Cain, 1966; Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998; Madden-Derdich et al., 1999). However, in the clearest test of the relationship between family boundary ambiguity and marital quality, Pasley and Ihinger-Tallman (1989) found no difference in marital adjustment and integration between remarried couples with high versus low levels of boundary ambiguity.

In sum, a scant empirical literature has dealt with family boundary ambiguity and its implications in the stepfamily context. Studies have been limited to small and select samples (Pasley, 1987; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1989), examine the perceptions of individual family members (Banker & Gaertner, 1998; Furstenberg, 1987), and focus on relationships between former rather than current spouses (Madden-Derdich et al., 1999) and perceptions of children (Borduin et al., 1990; Gross, 1987; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Smart et al. 2001). With its focus on remarriage, past research also neglects large numbers of stepfamilies formed through nonmarital childbearing and cohabitation (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995). Studies also do not adequately address structural complexity in

stepfamilies, which involve numerous combinations of full, step-, and half-siblings living inside and outside the household (Wineberg & McCarthy, 1998) and confound the effects of gender-of-parent and residence-of-children and the presence of shared children and stepfamily complexity (Pasley, 1987).

THE CURRENT STUDY

The current study addresses the limitations of prior work and provides a comprehensive investigation of boundary ambiguity in stepfamilies. First, I used a nationally representative sample of American families (NSFH), which allows for generalizations at the national level. Second, stepfamilies were defined broadly to include first-married, remarried, and cohabiting couples with children from previous unions living inside and/or outside the household. This expanded definition of the stepfamily stems from family systems theory, which considers the family a "system" of relationships that transcends legal ties and residential structures (Scanzoni, Polonko, Teachman, & Thompson, 1989). Central to this perspective is the recognition that family relationships may extend to people unrelated by blood, marriage, and household structure and may differ between family members within the same family system. The level of boundary ambiguity in this broad group of stepfamilies is compared to that in original two-parent families, similar to previous work limited to remarriage (e.g., Furstenberg, 1987; Pasley, 1987). Third, I examine the effects of a wider array of socioeconomic factors than has been examined previously and disentangle the effects of stepfamily structure that are confounded in prior work. Finally, I evaluate whether boundary ambiguity is related to couples' perceptions of relationship quality and stability. Despite the claim that boundary ambiguity negatively affects family functioning, only one prior study (Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1989) explicitly examined the association between boundary ambiguity and couples' relationships in stepfamilies.

METHOD

DATA

This study is based on a nationally representative sample of families drawn from the NSFH, conducted between 1987 and 1988. This data set is

especially useful for investigating boundary ambiguity in stepfamilies. The main advantage of the NSFH over other national surveys is that it contains direct reports of biological, adopted, and stepchildren from main respondents and secondary respondents (spouses and cohabiting partners). Boss (1987) conceptualized boundary ambiguity as a family-level construct, and these data allow me to assess whether individuals in the same family system have different perceptions of family membership, rather than relying on the reports of a single individual. Another important advantage is that the NSFH asks directly about children living in other households. Other data sources require the indirect identification of non-resident stepchildren. Finally, the NSFH oversampled certain under-represented groups including stepfamilies, cohabitators, ethnic minorities, and recently married couples, so samples are adequate in size for rigorous statistical analysis.

ANALYTIC SAMPLE

The sample comprises 3,357 married and cohabiting couples with minor step-, biological, or adopted children. This sample contains 1,044 stepfamilies and 2,313 original two-parent families, which are retained for the purposes of comparison. Stepfamilies are defined as married or cohabiting couples in which at least one partner has a biological or adopted child from a previous union living inside or outside the household. Original two-parent families are defined as families in which all the children are the biological or adopted children of both spouses or partners. I limit the analysis to couples with children younger than age 18 because accurate counts of adult children cannot be achieved. For instance, the NSFH does not distinguish between biological and stepchildren away at college. The analysis of relationship quality and stability is based on a subsample ($n = 2,696$) of the larger group in which both partners provide valid information on the relationship measures. A small number of cases missing on key sociodemographic variables were coded to the mean.

DEPENDENT VARIABLES

Boundary ambiguity. Similar to Pasley (1987), boundary ambiguity was operationalized as a couple-level construct, as any discrepancy in spouses' and partners' reports of shared children (the biological or adopted children of both partners) and/or stepchildren (biological or adopted children from previous unions). Stepchildren who have been

adopted by the stepparent are considered shared children rather than stepchildren because after adoption stepparents become legally responsible for their stepchildren (Bray & Berger, 1993).

A limitation of the NSFH for the current study is that it only permits the measurement of physical boundary ambiguity. The NSFH does not specifically ask each spouse to list people that he or she considers family members, so psychological boundary ambiguity cannot be assessed. However, Pasley's (1987) findings suggest that physical and psychological boundary ambiguity go hand in hand—the majority of couples with physical boundary ambiguity also have psychological ambiguity.

Physical boundary ambiguity is assessed by matching each partner's report of the children in the family. In the NSFH, respondents are asked to list the names of children living inside and outside the household. Each spouse lists her or his previous biological children and the previous biological children of the partner. For instance, main respondents are instructed to list all children living in the household. They identify biological and adopted children belonging to their current spouse or partner, biological and adopted children not belonging to their current spouse or partner, and stepchildren (their spouse or partner's biological or adopted children from previous unions). Main respondents are also asked about their own and their partners' nonresident children ("Do you [Does your husband/wife/partner] have any biological or adopted children age 18 or younger who do not live in this household at least half the time?"). Secondary respondents (main respondents' spouses and partners) are instructed to list their own children and the children of spouses and partners (e.g., "Do you or your husband/wife have any living sons or daughters of any age?") and are asked about their own resident and nonresident children from prior unions ("Do you have any sons or daughters age 18 or younger who live here, but whose other biological parent lives somewhere else?" And "Do you have any children age 18 or younger who do not live in this household?"). The fact that the question wording varies slightly for the main and secondary respondents may be problematic. For instance, previous research based on the NSFH indicates that individual reports of siblings over time are sensitive to subtle differences in question wording (White, 1998). Nonetheless, this is currently the best measurement strategy available.

Boundary ambiguity is coded as a dichotomous variable, with 1 indicating boundary ambiguity and 0 indicating no boundary ambiguity. Spouses who do not list the same children are coded as having ambiguous boundaries, whereas spouses who list the same children are coded as having no boundary ambiguity. For example, main respondents' reports

of stepchildren (and partner's children) living in the household were matched by household number to spouses' reports of biological children "living here, but whose other biological parent lives somewhere else." Likewise, main respondents' reports of their partners' biological and adopted children not living in the household are matched to their partners' report of their biological or adopted children who do not live in the household.

Relationship quality. Two separate measures assess the quality of the couple's relationship. First, I used a measure of each partner's level of happiness with the relationship. Each partner is asked, "Taking all things together, how would you describe your marriage/relationship?" Responses range from 1 (*very unhappy*) to 7 (*very happy*). Second, respondents were asked about the frequency of disagreement with their spouse or partner in the following areas: household tasks, money, spending time together, sex, having a(nother) child, in-laws, and the children. Responses range from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*almost every day*). The mean score of all non-missing items was used as a measure of overall disagreement. The scale has a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .77 for wives or female partners and .78 for husbands or male partners.

Relationship stability. Two questions gauge respondents' perceptions of the stability of the relationship. First, each partner is asked, "During the past year, have you ever thought that your marriage/relationship might be in trouble?" This is a dichotomous variable with a 1 indicating that the marriage is in trouble, and 0 indicating not in trouble. Second, respondents are asked, "It is always difficult to predict what will happen in a marriage, but realistically, what do you think the chances are that you and your husband/wife/partner will eventually separate/divorce?" Responses range from 1 (*very low*) to 5 (*very high*).

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Parenting configuration. Pasley (1987) assessed the effect of stepfamily structure and complexity by categorizing couples into six mutually exclusive parenting configurations. However, these variables provide an incomplete picture of stepfamily diversity. For instance, these variables cannot distinguish the effects of the sex of the biological parent and the residence of the child (i.e., the children of wives or female partners are assumed to be living in the household and the children of husbands or

male partners elsewhere). In addition, the effect of having a shared child is confounded with the level of complexity of the stepfamily. Although stepfamilies with a shared child are naturally complex and involve a minimum of two sets of children (i.e., one set of prior children and one set of shared children), so are couples in which both partners have children from a prior union. In contrast, my parenting variables allowed me to assess the independent effects of several different types stepfamily structure on boundary ambiguity. First, I included a dummy variable indicating that the couple has any resident and/or nonresident stepchildren as opposed to only shared biological or adopted children (the reference category). Then, I constructed a series of dummy variables that were designed to isolate the effects of the residence of the stepchildren from the sex of the biological parent/stepparent: (a) only the wife or female partner has resident children, (b) only the husband or male partner has resident children, (c) both spouses or partners have resident children, (d) only the wife or female partner has nonresident children, (e) only the husband or male partner has nonresident children, (f) both spouses or partners have nonresident children. Couples that have resident and nonresident stepchildren are categorized in Groups d through f (sample sizes are too small for separate analysis) so that couples with only resident children can be more readily compared. In addition, statistical comparisons are made between couples in which the husband or male partner versus the wife or female partner has previous children and between couples with resident and nonresident stepchildren.

I constructed a third set of dummy variables that separate the effects of having a shared child from the level of complexity of the family, regardless of the sex of the biological parent or stepparent and the residence of the child: (a) one spouse or partner has previous children and no shared children, (b) both spouses or partners have previous children and no shared children, (c) one spouse or partner has previous children and the couple has shared children, and (d) both spouses or partners have previous children and the couple has shared children. For example, comparing couples in which both partners have previous children but no shared children to couples in which one partner has previous children and also shared children provides a test of the effect of having a shared child because the number of sets of children is controlled (both couples have two sets). On the other hand, comparing couples in which one partner has previous children and also shared children to couples in which both partners have previous children and shared children provides a test of the effect of level of complexity because the effect of having a shared child is controlled. All of these parenting configurations were compared to

the basic reference category of couples with only shared biological or adopted children.

Family characteristics. In addition to structural complexity, I examined how additional aspects of the family context affect boundary ambiguity. Because socioeconomic factors are associated with stepfamily structure and complexity (Bachrach, 1983; Moorman & Hernandez, 1989; Thomson, 1994), they also act as important controls. Union status, whether the couple is married versus cohabiting, is coded as a dichotomous variable, with 1 indicating cohabiting couples. Couples' previous marital status is assessed with dummy variables indicating whether either partner has been previously married: neither, one partner, or both partners. The effect of the duration of the current union is measured as a continuous variable in years. The age of the couple's youngest child is also included, coded in years. Because of data limitations, this information was provided by the main respondent, who may or may not have been the biological parent and who may omit one or more children in the family. I used the age of the wife or female partner as a proxy of the couple's age and accounted for the gap in age between partners. The race of the wife or female partner indicates the couple's race, coded as White and non-White. In only 7% of cases was the wife or female partner's race different from that of the husband or male partner. Each spouse's level of education is coded as a series of dummy variables, less than high school, high school, some college, and college degree or greater. Finally, family income was measured in terms of the combined earnings of both partners.

ANALYSIS PLAN

The analysis was divided into two parts. First, I examined the relationship between parenting configuration, family characteristics, and boundary ambiguity using logistic regression, the standard analytic technique for modeling dichotomous dependent variables (DeMaris, 1995). Each parenting configuration variable is entered into a separate model, and all models control for the family characteristics discussed above. The second part of the analysis dealt with the effect of boundary ambiguity on couples' perceptions of relationship quality and stability. Two analytic techniques are used to compare the perceptions of spouses in unions with and without boundary ambiguity. ANCOVA is the technique used for continuous variables (happiness with relationship, frequency of disagreement, and chances of separating) whereas logistic regression is used for dichotomous variables (relationship in trouble). All analyses controlled for the

presence of stepchildren and family characteristics. Following Hobart (1988), who found that husbands or male partners and wives or female partners respond to different kin networks, husbands or male partners and wives or female partners were analyzed separately.

RESULTS

DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

Table 1 presents the percentage distribution of the independent variables used in the multivariate analysis (column 1) and shows the proportion of families experiencing boundary ambiguity by parenting configuration and family characteristics (column 2). For continuous variables (e.g., duration of union), Table 1 displays the mean value on each variable for all couples and couples with boundary ambiguity. The distribution of independent variables used in the analysis of relationship quality and stability based on the more limited sample is very similar and is therefore not shown.

The results in column 1 illustrate the pervasiveness and incredible structural diversity of stepfamilies. First, nearly one fourth (24%) of families with minor children include stepchildren. Second, families with stepchildren are not a homogeneous group. Stepfamilies are roughly evenly divided between those with resident and nonresident stepchildren (11% and 13% of all couples with children, respectively), and those with shared and no shared children (12% each of all couples with children). Stepfamilies also vary quite a bit in terms of their level of complexity, as a substantial proportion of stepfamilies have multiple sets of children. For instance, about one half of stepfamilies (13% of all couples with children) have two sets of children (either both spouses have previous children or one spouse has previous children and the couple has a shared child), and 1 in 10 stepfamilies (2% of all couples with children) have three sets (both spouses have previous children and the couple has a child together).

Results in column 2 show the proportion of boundary ambiguity in families by parenting configuration. About 12% of couples with minor children have ambiguous family boundaries. Boundary ambiguity is much more prevalent among stepfamilies than original two-parent families. Spouses or partners disagree in their reports of each other's children in one fourth of stepfamilies compared to 8% of couples with only shared children. In results not shown, I found that among stepfamilies with boundary ambiguity, 25% of discrepancies are to couples with more than

TABLE 1
Distribution of Couples Experiencing Boundary Ambiguity,
by Parenting Configuration and Family Characteristics

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>All Couples</i>	<i>% Boundary Ambiguity</i>
All couples	100.0	12.3
Parenting configuration		
Only shared children	76.4	8.3
Any stepchildren ^a	23.6	25.2
Only resident stepchildren	10.7	
Children of wife or female partner	7.2	11.1
Children of husband or male partner	1.9	13.0
Children of both spouses or partners	1.6	7.4
Any nonresident stepchildren ^b	12.9	
Children of wife or female partner	1.9	54.2
Children of husband or male partner	9.1	25.0
Children of both spouses or partners	1.9	79.4
Any stepchildren ^c		
One spouse or partner, no shared children	8.2	17.6
Both spouses or partners, no shared children	3.9	33.9
One spouse or partner, shared children	9.3	25.6
Both spouses or partners, shared children	2.2	37.0
Family characteristics		
Union status		
Married	94.5	11.3
Cohabiting	5.5	28.6
Previously married		
Neither spouse	69.1	9.2
One spouse	19.4	17.2
Both spouses	11.5	22.7
Duration of union in years (<i>M</i>)	11.9	9.1
Age of youngest child in years (<i>M</i>)	6.6	6.1
Age of wife or female partner in years (<i>M</i>)	34.4	33.7
Gap in age between partners in years (<i>M</i>)	3.7	4.6
Race of wife or female partner		
White	82.3	10.6
Non-White	17.7	20.1
Education of wife or female partner		
Less than high school	13.9	14.8
High school	41.3	13.6
Some college	23.6	11.9
College degree or greater	21.3	8.5
Education of husband or male partner		
Less than high school	14.7	15.5
High school	35.4	13.2

(continued)

TABLE 1 (continued)

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>All Couples</i>	<i>% Boundary Ambiguity</i>
Some college	23.3	14.1
College degree or greater	26.6	7.7
Family income in dollars (<i>M</i>)	\$39,106.3	\$32,646.9
<i>N</i> = 3,357	<i>n</i> = 461	

NOTE: Weighted percentages and means and unweighted *N*s. Differences between couples with boundary ambiguity versus no boundary ambiguity are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

a. Couples may have shared children.

b. Couples may have resident stepchildren.

c. Children may be resident or nonresident and the children of the husband or male partner, wife or female partner, or both.

one child. In addition, although boundary ambiguity may reflect the failure of one spouse to list the other spouse's children or their own children, the majority of omissions (92%) were spouse's children. Among the small number of couples in which one spouse or partner omits his or her own biological or adopted children, two thirds of cases were those in which the biological parent is a man and the stepparent is a woman, and all of these children reside outside the household. Because secondary respondents do not provide complete information on all children's age and sex, demographic information on so-called forgotten or missing children unfortunately could not be fully assessed.

Several aspects of stepfamily structure are associated with boundary ambiguity. A much higher proportion of couples with nonresident stepchildren have ambiguous family boundaries than couples with only resident stepchildren, at 37% compared to 11% (data not shown). In fact, couples with resident stepchildren are only slightly more likely to have ambiguous boundaries than couples with shared children. Among couples with resident stepchildren, rates of boundary ambiguity did not vary much depending on the sex of the children's biological parent and stepparent. However, among couples with nonresident stepchildren, boundary ambiguity appears to depend on whether the children belong to the husband or male partner, wife or female partner, or both partners. Boundary ambiguity is highest when both partners have children living outside the household (79%) and lowest when just the husband or male partner has children living outside the household (25%) as opposed to just the wife or female partner (54%).

The next set of variables was designed to examine the separate effects of degree of stepfamily complexity and the presence of a shared child. The

descriptive results indicate that boundary ambiguity is lowest in stepfamilies with a low level of complexity (i.e., just one spouse or partner has prior children and the couple has no shared children) and is higher in more complex stepfamilies (i.e., both spouses have prior children and the couple has shared children). A comparison between couples in which both partners have prior children and no shared children and couples in which one partner has prior children and the couple has shared children indicates that shared children may reduce the likelihood of boundary ambiguity (34% and 26%, respectively). On the other hand, a comparison of couples in which one partner has prior children and the couple has shared children and couples in which both partners have prior children and the couple has shared children indicates that the level of complexity of the family increases the likelihood of boundary ambiguity (26% and 37%, respectively).

In addition to parenting configuration, several characteristics of the family are related to boundary ambiguity. A higher proportion of cohabiting than married couples had boundary ambiguity, 29% compared to 11%. A lower proportion of couples in which neither spouse had been previously married have ambiguous boundaries than couples with just one previously married spouse or both previously married (9% compared to 17% and 23%, respectively). Couples with boundary ambiguity had, on average, been together for a shorter period of time, had younger children, had younger wives or female partners, and a larger gap in age between partners. About double the proportion of non-White couples had ambiguous boundaries than White couples, at 20% compared to 11%. Boundary ambiguity declines as level of education of husbands or male partners and wives or female partners increases, especially among college graduates. Couples with boundary ambiguity have lower incomes than couples with no boundary ambiguity. All the findings described above represent statistically significant differences.

MULTIVARIATE RESULTS

Table 2 presents the logistic regression results of the effects of parenting configuration and family characteristics on boundary ambiguity. The results are presented as odds ratios, which are the exponentiated values of the regression coefficients ($\exp[b_k]$) and indicate the change in odds of the dependent variable associated with a one-unit change in the independent variable, net of other predictors in the model (DeMaris, 1995). Odds ratios less than 1.00 indicate reduced odds whereas odds ratios greater than 1.00 indicate increased odds.

TABLE 2
Odds Ratios From Logistic Regression of Boundary Ambiguity on
Parenting Configuration and Family Characteristics (N = 3,357)

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>
Parenting configuration (Only shared children)			
Any stepchildren	2.752****		
Only resident stepchildren			
Children of wife or female partner		1.193	
Children of husband or male partner		1.488	
Children of both spouses or partners		1.008	
Any nonresident stepchildren			
Children of wife or female partner		10.990****	
Children of husband or male partner		3.036****	
Children of both spouses or partners		44.813****	
Any stepchildren			
One spouse or partner, no shared children			1.762**
Both spouses or partners, no shared children			4.203****
One spouse or partner, shared children			2.729****
Both spouses or partners, shared children			3.971****
Family characteristics			
Union status (Married)			
Cohabiting	1.399**	1.202	1.503**
Previously married (Neither spouse)			
One spouse	.955	1.066	.954
Both spouses	.962	.820	.823
Duration of union	.971**	.976*	.963***
Age of youngest child	.956***	.946****	.968*
Age of wife or female partner	1.029**	1.026**	1.031***
Gap in age between partners	1.017	1.020	1.021*
Race of wife or female partner			
(White)			
Non-White	2.012****	2.133****	1.948****
Education of wife or female partner			
Less than high school	.855	.792	.866
(High school)			
Some college	.784*	.744*	.789*
College degree or greater	.878	.809	.892
Education of husband or male partner			
Less than high school	.889	.869	.913
(High school)			
Some college	1.067	1.029	1.063
College degree or greater	.705**	.742	.713*
Family income	.988	.989	.987
Model χ^2	217.531****	402.352****	236.238****

NOTE: Reference category in parentheses.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. **** $p < .001$, two-tailed.

The first model shows the effect of having any stepchildren versus shared biological children (the reference category), net of couples' family characteristics. Couples with any stepchildren have almost 3 times the odds of boundary ambiguity than couples with only shared children. This in effect is very similar at the zero-order (results not shown). Several family characteristics are associated with boundary ambiguity. With the exception of previous marital status, the effects of these variables are similar with and without the parenting configuration variables in the model (results not shown). At the zero-order, previously married couples (one spouse or both) have significantly higher odds of boundary ambiguity than first-married couples. However, this effect is reduced to nonsignificance when the parenting configuration variables are included. The couple's union status is associated with boundary ambiguity. Cohabiting couples have 40% higher odds of boundary ambiguity than married couples. This makes sense given the greater ambiguity of social roles in cohabitation (Nock, 1995). Couples who have been together longer have lower odds of boundary ambiguity, as do couples with older children. These results probably reflect greater clarity of social roles as stepfamilies age. Age and race of the wife or female partner is associated with boundary ambiguity. Couples with older wives or female partners have higher odds of boundary ambiguity than couples with younger wives or female partners, and non-White couples have twice the odds of boundary ambiguity than White couples. Perhaps older stepparents are less accepting of new family members than younger stepparents. Although few studies have examined racial differences in stepfamily life, this finding adds support to research suggesting that family boundaries are interpreted differently by race. Husbands or male partners' education is associated with boundary ambiguity. Husbands or male partners with a college degree are significantly less likely to have ambiguous boundaries than high school graduates. This finding may be related to the fact that more educated fathers are more involved with children from previous unions than less educated fathers (Braver, Fitzpatrick, & Bay, 1991; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Veum, 1993). Variables not associated with boundary ambiguity are gap in age between partners, wife or female partner's education (couples in which the wife or female partner has some college have less boundary ambiguity at $p < .10$), and family income.

Model 2 introduces variables to assess the separate effects of the residence of the stepchildren and sex of the children's biological parent and stepparent. Including this information significantly improves model fit (results not shown). Couples with resident stepchildren do not have higher odds of boundary ambiguity than couples with only shared children.

Moreover, the parentage of these children does not affect boundary ambiguity—results are similar whether the children belong to the husband or male partner, wife or female partner, or both partners.¹ However, consistent with prior research (Hobart, 1988; Pasley, 1987), results suggest that nonresident stepchildren have a strong positive effect on family boundary ambiguity compared to couples with only shared children (the reference category). These effects vary depending on whether the nonresident children are the biological children of the husband or male partner, wife, or both partners. Couples in which both partners have nonresident children have the highest odds of boundary ambiguity, 44 times the odds of couples with shared children, controlling for family characteristics. Couples in which the wife or female partner has nonresident children have 10 times the odds of boundary ambiguity. Couples in which the husband or male partner has nonresident children have 3 times the odds of boundary ambiguity as couples with shared children. These effects are similar at the zero-order (results not shown). Differences between couples with wives or female partners, husbands or male partners, and both partners having nonresident children are statistically significant, and the positive effect of wives or female partners' nonresident children is more than 3 times as large as the positive effect of husbands or male partners' nonresident children (results not shown). Because nonresident motherhood remains quite rare, it makes sense that family boundaries would be less clear in these situations. The effects of the various family characteristics on boundary ambiguity operate in a similar manner to the previous model.

Model 3 includes variables that assess the separate effects of a shared child and the level of complexity of the family on boundary ambiguity. The addition of these variables significantly improves the fit of the model (results not shown). They are included separately from the gender-of-parent and residence-of-child variables because combining them produces cell sizes too small for meaningful comparisons. Similar to the descriptive findings, couples with the least amount of complexity (just one set of children) have the lowest odds of boundary ambiguity. Couples in which one spouse or partner has previous children and the couple has no shared children have 76% greater odds of boundary ambiguity than couples with only shared children. On the other hand, couples with at least two sets of stepchildren (couples in one of the other three groups) have odds of boundary ambiguity that are between 2 and 4 times as high. These results are similar in the zero-order model that does not include controls for family characteristics (results not shown). The contrast between couples in which both spouses have previous children and no shared children and couples in which one spouse has previous children and the couple has

a shared child provides a test of the effect of a shared child (the level of complexity is controlled at two sets of children). Couples in which both partners have children from previous unions have 54% greater odds of boundary ambiguity than couples with one set of previous children and shared children, at $p = .08$ (results not shown).² These results suggest that the addition of a shared child to the stepfamily may reduce boundary ambiguity. The contrast between couples in which one spouse has previous children and the couple has shared children and couples in which both spouses have previous children and the couple has shared children provides a test of how the level of complexity of the family affects boundary ambiguity (in this case, the presence of shared children is controlled). Results (not shown) indicate that couples with three sets of children (both spouses and shared) have 46% greater odds of boundary ambiguity than couples with two sets (one spouse and shared). Although not statistically significant at the conventional level ($p = .14$), these results may have some practical importance and are suggestive of greater ambiguity among couples with more complicated parenting obligations (see previous note). The effects of the control variables in this model are similar to previous models and are therefore not discussed.

Table 3 presents results with respect to the effect of boundary ambiguity on couples' perceptions of relationship quality and stability. The first two columns compare the perceptions of husbands or male partners with boundary ambiguity and husbands or male partners without boundary ambiguity, and the third and fourth columns compare the perceptions of wives and female partners with and without boundary ambiguity. All analyses include controls for the parenting configuration and family characteristics listed in Table 1. Results are similar whether the controls are included in the model, and thus the zero-order effects are not shown. First, results suggest that perceptions of relationship quality do not vary by boundary ambiguity for husbands or male partners. Husbands or male partners in unions with boundary ambiguity report a similar level of happiness in the relationship and frequency of disagreement as husbands or male partners in unions with no boundary ambiguity. On the other hand, wives or female partners in unions with boundary ambiguity report significantly more disagreements than wives or female partners in unions with no boundary ambiguity. Relationship happiness is not significantly different for wives or female partners with and without boundary ambiguity.

With respect to relationship stability, husbands or male partners have a similar probability of thinking that the relationship is in trouble whether they are in unions with ambiguous family boundaries. Results are similar for wives or female partners. Husbands or male partners' assessments of

TABLE 3
ANCOVA and Logistic Regression Results of Effect of
Boundary Ambiguity on Relationship Quality and Stability

	<i>Husbands or Male Partners</i>		<i>Wives or Female Partners</i>	
	<i>Boundary Ambiguity</i>		<i>Boundary Ambiguity</i>	
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Relationship quality (<i>M</i>)				
Happiness with relationship	6.15	6.03	5.99	5.99
Frequency of disagreement	1.92	1.91	1.97 ^a	1.89
Relationship stability (<i>M</i>)				
Relationship in trouble ^b	.22	.25	.48	.50
Chances of separating	1.51	1.49	1.55 ^a	1.48

NOTE: All results control for the presence of stepchildren, union status, previous marital status, duration of the union, age of the youngest child, wife or female partner's age, difference in partners' ages, race, education of both partners, and income.

a. Differences between wives or female partners with boundary ambiguity and no boundary ambiguity are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

b. Results expressed as probabilities, with control variables set to the mean or mode.

their chances of separating are also not dependent on family boundary ambiguity. However, wives or female partners who have ambiguous family boundaries report chances of separating that are significantly higher than wives or female partners with no ambiguity. Although the gap between wives or female partners with and without boundary ambiguity with respect to frequency of disagreements and chances of separating is relatively small, these results support the hypothesis that boundary ambiguity negatively affects relationship quality and stability. In addition, the presence of stepchildren (regardless of boundary ambiguity) is associated with greater frequency of disagreements for wives or female partners and increased perception that the couple will separate for husbands or male partners and wives or female partners.

Given the strain associated with ambiguous family boundaries, I tested, separately for husbands or male partners and wives or female partners, whether boundary ambiguity is related to individual well-being, including self-worth ("I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others"), self-satisfaction ("On the whole, I am satisfied with myself"), and overall happiness ("Taking all things together, how would you say things are these days?"). I did not find evidence that boundary ambiguity influences individual well-being (results not shown). Given that boundary ambiguity deals specifically with perceptions of children, I

tested whether having ambiguous family boundaries is associated with spouses' general attitudes about stepchildren ("Children have fewer problems with two natural parents than with one natural parent and one step-parent") and spouses' perceptions of their partners' feelings about parenting ("How would your partner's life be different if you separated, in terms of being a parent?"). No statistically significant relationships emerged. However, the presence of stepchildren, net of controls and level of boundary ambiguity, was associated with less self-satisfaction and happiness for wives or female partners. Husbands or male partners and wives or female partners with stepchildren are also less likely to agree with the statement that children have fewer problems when raised by two natural parents. Yet husbands or male partners and wives or female partners with stepchildren are more likely to say their partners' life, in terms of being a parent, would be better if they separated. The results with respect to the effect of stepchildren on relationship quality, stability, and well-being are available from the author on request.

DISCUSSION

Although stepfamilies are traditionally associated with ambiguous family boundaries, few studies have examined family boundary ambiguity in stepfamilies empirically. In the current study, I used nationally representative data and a family systems perspective to examine boundary ambiguity in a wide array of families—first-married, remarried, and cohabiting couples with children from previous and current unions. I found a relatively high level of boundary ambiguity in stepfamilies, although somewhat less than in prior research (Pasley, 1987). In one fourth of stepfamilies, spouses disagreed in their reports of the children in the family. In contrast, boundary ambiguity is quite rare in families that contain only shared children, similar to prior research (Pasley, 1987). Moreover, this estimate is likely to be conservative because it is restricted to perceptions of family membership and does not assess ambiguity with respect to role performance (Boss, 1987). The current research indicates that the family boundary ambiguity concept is a useful tool for understanding stepfamilies and their tendency to "lose" children.

Boundary ambiguity is more prevalent in certain types of stepfamilies, stepfamilies with nonresident stepchildren and stepfamilies that are more structurally complex, and less prevalent among stepfamilies with a shared biological child. The current study provides important new evidence that boundary ambiguity depends on both the residence of the child and the sex

of the parent and stepparent. Although stepfamily members sometimes define people living in other households as "family" (White, 1998), the current research supports Pasley's (1987) contention that nonresident stepchildren are largely "out of sight, out of mind" and research suggesting greater role ambiguity among nonresident than resident parents (Ambert, 1986; Fine, 1995; Greif, 1997). On the other hand, given that most discrepancies can be attributed to stepparents' failure to report stepchildren, it is important to consider that these so-called forgotten or missing children probably turn up as family members in another household, namely, that of their other biological parent. The findings with respect to the sex of the biological parent and stepparent suggest that nonnormative parenting configurations (husbands or male partners with biological children living in the home and wives or female partners with biological children living outside the home) may increase ambiguity in definitions of family.

The negative (albeit weak) effect of shared children is consistent with previous work suggesting that the addition of a shared child encourages family integration (Beer, 1992; Bernstein, 1989; Duberman, 1973; White et al., 1985). For instance, research by Hofferth and Anderson (2003) indicates that stepchildren have higher levels of well-being in stepfamilies that include half-siblings. However, because the current findings are based on cross-sectional data, the possibility that boundary ambiguity influences couples' decisions about having another child cannot be rejected: Those with the least ambiguous family boundaries may be the most likely to have a child. Future work with longitudinal data is needed to assess how the addition of half-siblings affects the stepfamily system.

These results also suggest that couples with multiple parenting obligations may be more likely to disagree in their perceptions of family membership than couples with fewer parenting obligations. Moreover, it appears that the accumulation of parenting demands, rather than the presence of a shared child, produces the positive effect. It is therefore inappropriate to assume that children in stepfamilies have access to a widened familial network, especially when parents have multiple sets of children. It is nonresident children that are most hurt when couples with stepchildren take on additional parenting roles. For instance, research (Manning, Stewart, & Smock, 2003) suggested that the wider the array of nonresident fathers' parenting obligations, the lower their levels of involvement with nonresident children. Other work suggests the potential for three classes of children to develop in complex stepfamilies, with nonresident children the most frequently marginalized and shared children the least marginalized (Hobart, 1988).

Results indicate that boundary ambiguity may negatively affect relationship quality and stability, but only for wives or female partners, in contrast to prior research (Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1989). Because women are generally more relationship centered than men, wives or female partners may experience greater distress from boundary ambiguity than husbands or male partners. Thoit's (1992) research on identity indicates that women are more likely to claim the role of stepparent than men suggesting that they are more in touch with definitions of family and therefore could be more affected by discrepancies. Alternatively, I may have measured boundary ambiguity too crudely to pick up effects for husbands or male partners. Boundary ambiguity is measured conservatively as differences in perceptions of family membership. Boundary ambiguity with respect to stepfamily roles is not assessed, and inconsistencies in perceptions of the social roles of recognized family members, rather than inconsistent perceptions of membership, may affect stepfamily relationships. This issue could be responsible for the low level of boundary ambiguity in my sample of stepfamilies, despite the inclusion of cohabiting couples, relative to prior work (Pasley, 1987). It is possible that husbands or male partners more so than wives or female partners expect a certain degree of ambiguity in their relationships and thus are not negatively affected by differing perceptions (Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1989). Walker and Messinger (1979) argued that the most successful stepfamilies are those that keep boundaries permeable, allowing free-flowing contact and affection with quasi-kin. In other words, it may not be important for family members to acknowledge these prior alliances. In essence, members of stepfamilies may agree to disagree, and men might be more comfortable with this than women.

Future work should also examine potential factors that may moderate this relationship, such as parent-child closeness. It is also important to consider that family boundary ambiguity may affect stepfamily relationships other than that between spouses and partners (e.g., biological parent-child, stepparent-stepchild, and between step-, half-, and full siblings). Researchers should examine the effect of boundary ambiguity on the full array of stepfamily relationships. Although boundary ambiguity did not have strong effects on couples' relationships, the presence of stepchildren was associated with more disagreements and an increase in couples' perceptions that they may separate and that things would improve for their partner if they did. These findings are consistent with prior work suggesting that the stresses of raising stepchildren may be responsible for high rates of divorce among remarried couples (Booth & Edwards, 1992; White & Booth, 1985). In addition, the current study provides

important evidence that stepchildren may negatively affect the individual well-being of their parents and stepparents and augments research linking stepparenting to stress (Thoits, 1992). This is an advance over prior work limited to studying the effect of remarriage on adult well-being (Coleman et al., 2000).

Family formation patterns are becoming more varied, with family boundary changes expected to increase in frequency (Boss, 1980a). One half of all marriages are remarriages (National Center for Health Statistics, 1990), most involve children from previous unions (U. S. Census Bureau, 1992), and one half of remarried women have a child after remarriage (Bumpass, 1984; Wineberg, 1990). In addition, high rates of non-marital childbearing, cohabitation, and greater involvement of noncustodial parents have increased the diverse and dynamic nature of stepfamily life (Coleman et al., 2000).

The current study enhances prior work on boundary ambiguity in stepfamilies by broadening the scope of stepfamily life and disentangling the effects of stepfamily structure and complexity. Researchers employing couple- and family-level models are likely to encounter inconsistencies in the reports of stepfamily members. Future studies should continue to account for family boundary ambiguity until the full implications of this phenomenon for stepfamily relationships can be determined. The current study highlights just one of the many challenges facing researchers investigating contemporary stepfamilies. Addressing such complexities will lead to a better understanding of this widespread family form.

NOTES

1. The wide confidence intervals produced by the analysis suggest that the lack of significance of resident stepchildren may be a matter of inadequate statistical power (Agresti & Finlay, 1986). For instance, couples in which the husband or male partner has children from prior unions living in the home have almost 50% greater odds of boundary ambiguity than couples that have only shared children, with a wide confidence interval between 0.726 and 3.053, respectively. The lack of statistical significance of the effect could be due to the small sample sizes of the particular groups being compared and the possibility of a Type II error is high.

2. The inability to reject the null hypothesis at a conventional level of significance may be the result of a Type II error (see previous note).

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