

**THE ROLE OF STEPSIBLINGS IN ADOLESCENTS'
ADJUSTMENT TO RECONSTITUTED FAMILIES**

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THE ROLE OF STEPSIBLINGS IN ADOLESCENTS' ADJUSTMENT TO RECONSTITUTED FAMILIES

by

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Declaration

I declare that this article hereby submitted by me for the Master of Arts (Counselling Psychology) degree at the University of the Free State is my own work and has not been submitted by me at another university/faculty. I furthermore cede copyright of this article in favour of the University of the Free State.

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate whether the presence of stepsiblings impacts on the adolescent's adjustment to reconstituted families and whether adolescent's adjustment to reconstituted families differs in terms of stepfamily type. To achieve this, adolescent adjustment was measured across three different family types: non-stepfamilies, simple stepfamilies and complex stepfamilies. The complex stepfamilies were divided into three subgroups: stepfamilies in which residential stepsiblings were either of the opposite sex or the same sex or of both sexes to enable the researcher to investigate the moderating effect of sibling gender on the interaction between gender and family type on adolescent adjustment. The total sample comprised of 90 adolescents from English medium schools in the Free State. To ensure a more homogenous sample, the following were controlled for: age (15 to 18 years), race (white), socio-economic status (middle-upper class), length of second marriage (exceeding two years), and the absence of multiple family disruptions (more than one divorce or parental death). Adolescent adjustment was investigated by means of the FFAQ according to the six dimensions: Structure, Affect, Communication, Behaviour Control, Value Transmission and External Systems. A biographical questionnaire was also used to accommodate items pertaining to the participants' family type and the control variables. A two-way analysis of variance was performed on each of the subscales of the FFAQ with family type and gender as independent variables. The results generally reflected a non-significant interaction effect of gender and family type on the adjustment of male and female participants from the five family types. However, a significant interaction effect (at the 5%-level) of gender and family type was found on the 'Structure' subscale of the FFAQ. Thus, the adjustment of male and female adolescents to reconstituted families differed from adolescents from non-stepfamilies with regard to the structure (a family's organisational structure with clear but permeable boundaries around individual members and a cohesive parental subsystem) of the family. A post-hoc t-test revealed that boys experienced a significantly (at the 1%-level) higher degree of structure than girls did, suggesting that the adjustment of boys in complex stepfamilies in which residential stepsiblings are of both sexes is significantly better for boys than for girls.

Key terms: adolescent adjustment, presence of stepsiblings, family type, simple stepfamilies, complex stepfamilies, non-stepfamilies, gender differences, structural differences, FFAQ, adolescent's' attitude towards stepsiblings.

OPSOMMING

Hierdie studie is onderneem om vas te stel of die teenwoordigheid van stiefsibbes 'n invloed het op adolessente se aanpassing by hersaamgestelde gesinne en om te ondersoek of adolessente se aanpassing by hersaamgestelde gesinne verskil ten opsigte van die tipe stiefgesin. Ten einde dit vas te stel, is die aanpassing van adolessente in drie verskillende tipes gesinne ondersoek: biologiese gesinne, eenvoudige stiefgesinne en komplekse stiefgesinne. Die komplekse stiefgesinne is in drie groepe onderverdeel: stiefgesinne waarvan die inwonende stiefsibbes van die teenoorgestelde, of dieselfde geslag as die toetsling, of van beide geslagte is. Sodoende kon die navorser die bemiddelende effek van die sibbes se geslag op die interaksie tussen geslag en gesinstipe op adolessente se aanpassing, ondersoek. Die totale steekproef het uit 90 adolessente van Engels-medium skole in die Vrystaat bestaan. Om 'n meer homogene steekproef te verseker, is daar vir die volgende veranderlikes gekontroleer: ouderdom (15 tot 18 jaar), ras (blank), sosio-ekonomiese status (hoër-middelklas), duur van tweede huwelik (langer as twee jaar), en die afwesigheid van meervoudige gesinstransisies (meer as een egskeiding of die dood van 'n ouer). Adolessente se aanpassing is deur middel van die VGFA ondersoek volgens die ses subskale: Struktuur, Affek, Kommunikasie, Gedragsbeheer, Waarde-oordrag en Eksterne Sisteme. Daar is ook gebruik gemaak van 'n biografiese vraelys wat items met betrekking tot die veranderlikes waarvoor daar gekontroleer is en die deelnemers se gesinstipe, geïnkorporeer het. 'n Tweerigting variansie ontleding is op elk van die ses subskale van die VGFA uitgevoer met gesinstipe en geslag as onafhanklike veranderlikes. Die resultate het oor die algemeen op 'n nie-beduidende interaksie effek van geslag en gesinstipe op die aanpassing van manlike en vroulike deelnemers van die vyf verskillende gesinstipes gedui. 'n Beduidende interaksie effek (op die 5%-peil) tussen geslag en gesinstipe is egter op die 'Struktuur'-subskaal van die VGFA gevind. Dus verskil die aanpassing van adolessente ten opsigte van 'Struktuur' ('n gesin se organisatoriese struktuur met duidelike, maar deurlaatbare grense tussen die individuele lede en, 'n kohesiewe ouer-subsisteem) tussen geslagte in verskillende gesinstipes. Hierdie interaksie is deur middel van 'n t-toets verder ondersoek. Hiervolgens is die aanpassing van seuns in komplekse stiefgesinne waarin die inwonende stiefsibbes van beide geslagte is, beduidend (op die 1%-peil) beter as die meisies se aanpassing in hierdie gesinne.

Kernwoorde: *aanpassing van adolessente, teenwoordigheid van stiefsibbes, gesinstipe, eenvoudige stiefgesinne, komplekse stiefgesinne, biologiese gesinne, geslagsverskille, strukturele verskille, VGFA, adolessent se houding teenoor stiefsibbes.*

THE ROLE OF STEPSIBLINGS IN ADOLESCENTS' ADJUSTMENT TO RECONSTITUTED FAMILIES

Introduction

As marriage has become a more optional, less permanent institution there has been a decline in the proportion of two-parent households in first marriages and an increase in the number of single-parent households and stepfamilies (Hetherington, Henderson & Reiss, 1999). Approximately one-third of all the marriages in Australia are remarriages (Isaacs, 2002). The divorce rate in the United States of America has declined slightly in the 1990s from a high of more than 50% of new marriages ending in divorce to about 43% more recently. However, the statistics are still alarming when one takes into account that nearly half of all the marriages are now remarriages (Peterson, 2002). When these remarriages include children, nearly two thirds will include stepsiblings or halfsiblings (White & Riedmann, 1992). According to Hetherington et al., the United States Bureau of the Census' 1995 results reflect that the percentage of children under the age of 18 living with both biological parents has decreased from 90% in 1970 to 69% in 1994. Statistics SA (Moodie & Anstay, 2002), state that the number of recorded divorces in South Africa is on the increase. These authors report that the national average for divorces in 1999 was 83 per 100 000 people and more than 45 000 children were affected by divorce. Yet barely anything is known about the relationships in reconstituted families – how children of remarriage define other participants in the reconstituted family and how this impacts on their adjustment to the reconstituted family. Research is clear in establishing that parental remarriage and the subsequent formation of a stepfamily are associated with greater stress in nearly all family subsystems, including between stepsiblings (White, 1994). Yet White reports that, to date, a very small body of literature addresses the effects of parental divorce on relationships among stepsiblings or the influence of the presence of stepsiblings on children's adjustment to remarried families. This research void is exaggerated in the South African context.

Adolescent adjustment in stepfamilies

Adolescence is a period characterised by dramatic physical changes and sexual development, the maturation of patterns of thought, increased academic demands, identity crises and identity formation, and social-emotional changes involving peer-group and family relations. It is also a time of experimentation, whether it be with sex, drugs, hair colour, or various kinds of rule breaking (Morris & Maisto, 1999). Morris and Maisto maintain that it is a developmental stage during which problems are apt to arise and after a non-normative transition, such as remarriage, there are family life-cycle issues that may be especially problematic for adolescents in stepfamilies. Entering a

remarriage involves adaptation to an entirely new ideology and culture. Chapman (1991) describes the level of adolescent adjustment to reconstituted families as connected to the developmental changes occurring during this stage. Cognitively, adolescents may have formed more well-defined conceptions of what a family should be than younger children and, thus, may be required to work harder to adapt. The adolescent's emerging sexuality calls for a redefinition of common behaviours and expressions of warmth and affection, adding psychosexual meaning. Thus, the adolescent may become less demonstrative and more uncomfortable with family members. Because adolescents in stepfamilies are simultaneously attempting to redefine their relationships with their biological parents, negotiate relationships with stepparents or stepsiblings, assert autonomy and independence, and maintain status, their stepfamily may be at greater risk for increased conflict. Behaviour problems may be exacerbated by parents who intensify loyalty conflicts or display inappropriate, confrontational or irrational styles of handling conflict, which their children learn during the process of divorce. Behaviour standards are an issue for these adolescents, who often experiment with a wide variety of behaviours their parents and stepparents may find unacceptable. Chapman states that higher rates have been found for smoking, alcohol and marijuana usage, and sexual intercourse for young adolescents in stepfamilies than in intact nuclear families, even when controlling for age, sex, race and parental education.

Research in the field of adolescent adjustment to divorced and reconstituted families has been marked by conflicting results and opposing views. Researchers initially viewed exposure to stepfamilies as inherently pathogenic or problematic for adolescents (Isaacs, 2002). Many of the early studies have attempted to document the effects of divorce – and to a lesser extent remarriage – on the adjustment and development of adolescents. In these studies, attention was mainly focused on adolescent outcomes such as emotional maladjustment, behaviour problems, academic failure, and juvenile delinquency (Amato, 1987). Although negative outcomes were found to occur more frequently among adolescents from divorced and remarried families in comparison to intact nuclear families, earlier studies have generally failed to demonstrate that parental divorce and remarriage have significant negative and dramatic long-term psychological effects on adolescents. Instead, the effects of divorce and remarriage appeared to be more subtle and involved changes in adolescents' relationships with mothers, fathers, siblings, and other family members. Although more recent studies (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee, 2000) still do not yield concordant results regarding the effect of divorce and remarriage on adolescent adjustment, evidence has emerged that suggests that adolescents from remarried families experience more negative outcomes than those from nuclear families (Fine & Kurdek, 1992; Hetherington et al, 1999; Isaacs, 2002). Even though there appears to be a small difference in the effect of the

increased risk of behavioural and emotional problems among adolescents from nuclear families compared to adolescents from stepfamilies, Hetherington et al. report a dramatic increase in the occurrence of such negative outcomes among adolescents from stepfamilies. Furthermore, the majority of the more recent studies (Demo & Acock, 1996; Kurdek, Fine & Sinclair, 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994) yield results confirming that, on average, adolescents in divorced and remarried families, in comparison to those in nuclear families, are more likely to exhibit emotional and behavioural problems and that marital transitions in family structure do have significant and long-term effects on a number of adolescent well-being variables (Spruijt and DeGoede, 1997).

According to Amato (Isaacs, 2002) the effect of the increased risk of behavioural problems and negative psychosocial outcomes among adolescents of stepfamilies, compared with nuclear families with two biological parents, is relatively small. Amato reports that this effect size generally falls within 0,2 of a standard deviation, which suggests that there is a considerable overlap among the outcomes of adolescents from stepfamilies and adolescents from nuclear families. These findings support a 1991 meta-analysis by Amato and Keith (1991a) in which they found relatively modest effect sizes which were greatly reduced when the adjustment of the adolescent preceding the marital transition was taken into account and controlled for, again implying that adolescents from divorced and remarried families do not experience significantly lower levels of adjustment than adolescents from nondivorced nuclear families. Hetherington and Kelly's (2002) findings of Hetherington's latest longitudinal study on the impact of divorce appear to support the view that the negative impact of divorce on offspring has been exaggerated. She found that only about one-fifth of adolescents experience any long-term damage after their parents' divorce and that 75 to 80% of adolescents from divorced homes cope reasonably well. However, problems in adjustment have been documented to occur frequently in the immediate aftermath of a marital transition, and some researchers have found that problems in adolescent adjustment can continue long after their parents' marital transition has occurred (Amato & Keith, 1991b). According to Booth and Dunn (1994) the majority of adolescents exhibit problems during a transition period immediately following their parents' remarriage. These problems may be triggered by developmental changes and challenges during adolescence.

Findings contrary to Hetherington's latest research (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) have dominated the field of family research over the past decade. In a study conducted by Wallerstein in 1989 (Peterson, 2002) it was found that children of divorce lack role models for healthy marriages, have a longer adolescence as they have to help their emotionally wounded parents heal, have less of a

chance at college, greater substance-abuse problems, less competence in social relationships and often experience difficulty in bonding in stepfamilies. A follow-up study by Wallerstein in 2000 (Wallerstein et al., 2000) yielded similar results. Various other studies confirm that, on average, adolescents in divorced families and stepfamilies, in comparison to those in nondivorced nuclear families, are more likely to exhibit behavioural and emotional problems (Demo & Acock, 1996; Kurdek et al., 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). They exhibit less socially responsible behaviour and are more likely to initiate sexual activities earlier, to be teen parents, drop out of school and exhibit poorer academic achievement, associate with antisocial peers, and to be involved in substance abuse and delinquent activities. Offspring of divorced and remarried parents also demonstrate lower self-esteem, lower social competence and have problems in relationships with parents and peers, and in relationships with romantic partners and spouses in adulthood (Amato & Keith, 1991b; Hetherington, 1999). Hetherington et al. (1999) report that offspring of divorced and remarried families have greater marital instability. Amato and Keith have found lower socioeconomic attainment, less life satisfaction, and more adjustment problems in adulthood among offspring from divorced and remarried families compared to offspring from intact nuclear families. The largest and most consistently obtained differences are in externalising disorders and lack of social responsibility, and to a lesser extent in achievement (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Booth & Dunn, 1994).

Furthermore, recent studies have reported about a two-fold increase among adolescents from remarried families in such issues as behaviour problems, externalising behaviour, school dropout, teenage pregnancy, and delinquency (Hetherington et al., 1999; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Simons & Associates, 1996). Hetherington et al. report that about 10% of offspring from nuclear families experience these problems, compared to 20 to 25% in divorced and remarried families. It can be postulated that, in spite of increased economic resources following a remarriage and the presence of an additional parent figure, the adjustment of adolescents in remarried families differs little from those in divorced families. This leads some researchers to conclude that problems in the adjustment of stepchildren may be attributable to divorce and life in a single-parent family or that the stresses in a stepfamily are sufficient to counter the economic, social, and emotional support a stepparent may bring to the family (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Blake & Hagan, 1994; Bornstein, 1995; Hetherington et al., 1999; Lamb, 1997). In fact, Eggebeen (1992) stated that stepfamily experiences may be more detrimental than divorce. Adolescents whose parents have gone through multiple marital transitions show the most severe problems in conduct disorders and achievement (Capaldi & Patterson, 1991; Kurdek et al., 1994, 1995).

It remains true that stepfamilies face unique tasks involving the restructuring and reorganisation of existing roles and relationships, and these must be negotiated in the absence of clear societal norms (Isaacs, 2002). Cherlin's (1978, MacDonald & DeMaris, 1995) "incomplete institutionalisation" hypothesis posits that stepfamilies are relatively lacking in the kinds of norms that guide more traditional (that is two-parent biological) families in dealing with particularly complex family relations. Visher and Visher (1988) confirmed that roles and relationships in "complex" stepfamilies (where both spouses are living with children from each of their previous marriages) may be more confusing than those in "simple" stepfamilies (where only one spouse lives with children of the other spouse) because few institutional guidelines exist to regulate these roles and relationships. This greater confusion and difficulty may lead to family conflict which, in turn, may result in poorer adjustment for adolescents in complex stepfamilies relative to those in simple stepfamilies (Fine & Kurdek, 1992). It is not surprising then that, among remarriage, divorce occurs more rapidly and at a higher rate than in first marriages (Hetherington et al., 1999). The presence of stepchildren increases the risk of marital dissolution in a remarriage by 50% (Tzeng & Mare, 1995).

In addition, the adjustment of adolescents in stepmother and stepfather families is similar (Fine & Kurdek, 1992). Sex differences are not consistently obtained in these studies. When they are found, however, they are more likely to occur with preadolescents than adolescents, and girls are reported to be more adversely affected by being in a stepfamily and are less able to benefit from the presence of a stepfather than are boys (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Hetherington et al., 1999; Lee, Burkham, Zimiles, & Ladewski, 1994).

There might be truth in some researchers' notion that the view of exposure to stepfamilies as inherently pathogenic or problematic for adolescents fails to take into account the vast diversity of responses to parental remarriage, as well as the complex network of factors that can either enhance or impede the adolescent's adjustment (Isaacs, 2002). There might also be truth in Amato's (1987) findings that the effects of divorce and remarriage appear to be subtler than the issues regarding emotional and behavioural problems mentioned previously and that it is more likely to involve changes in relationships with mothers, fathers, siblings and other family members. Either way, a two-fold increase is not negligible, and although the size of the effects on adolescent adjustment might be modest, they affect large numbers of individuals and the vast majority of the available literature indicate that these effects are long-lasting (Hetherington, 1999; Hetherington et al., 1999; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Wallerstein et al., 2000). These effects and adolescent adjustment in stepfamilies, therefore, remain of concern.

Sibling relationships in stepfamilies

Establishing a relationship with a sibling is a challenge for all children who have them. When a sibling relationship is conflictual or distressing, children and adolescents do not have the option of terminating that relationship as can be done in friendships. Hence, although there is affection and positive interactions exhibited in both siblings and peer relations, greater negativity and conflict are found in sibling relationships (Boer & Dunn, 1992). It has been remarked that siblings show considerable pragmatic understanding of how to annoy and how to console each other (Dunn & Kendrick, 1982). Accordingly, the quality of sibling relationships often is found to moderate or mediate the effects on child adjustment of other stressors such as poverty (McLloyd, 1998), marital conflict (Hetherington, 1999), parental depression (Cicchetti & Toth, 1998), or antisocial behaviour (Hetherington & Blechman, 1996), and parental marital transitions (Booth & Dunn, 1994; Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington et al., 1999). Thus, under changing life circumstances and increased stresses, such as are found when confronting parents' divorces or remarriages, sibling relationships may alter and either exacerbate problems in adjusting to marital transition or protect siblings from adverse outcomes (Hetherington, 1999; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). According to Hetherington and Jodl (Isaacs, 2002), negative sibling relationships lead to behavioural problems, whereas positive sibling relationships can be a buffer, particularly during adolescence. It is, thus, clear that sibling relationships play an important role in children's and adolescents' emotional, cognitive and behavioural development (Boer & Dunn, 1992). Yet, in contrast to data on parent-child relationships, few studies of stepfamilies have included assessment of sibling relationships and little is known about the role of the diverse sibling relationships found in stepfamilies. In studies of sibling relationships in remarried families, researchers frequently have disregarded possible differences in quality, functioning and contributions of these relationships. The association between sibling relationships and adolescent adjustment has rarely been explored.

Earlier findings report that it may be easier for children and adolescents to justify differential treatment of siblings by parents in complex stepfamilies on the basis of biological relatedness, leading to reduced sibling rivalry. For adolescents in complex stepfamilies, either friendship formation or disengagement with stepsiblings may occur. According to Ihinger-Tallman (Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1987), many residential stepsiblings, however, form successful satellite relationships that provide both support and companionship and some studies have found that conflict between stepsiblings does not appear to be excessive (Beer, 1992; White & Riedmann, 1992). Duberman (Lutz, 1983) reported that stepsibling relations in complex stepfamilies are more likely to be positive if they lived in the same house.

However, some earlier studies, as well as more recent studies (Dunn, Deater-Deckard, Pickering & O'Connor, 1998), bring evidence of the contrary to the fore. When remarried parents combine their children from previous relationships in blended households, children experience many life changes which may add to the stress caused by parents' marital transition. These include changes in family size and the child's position in the family, competition over scarce resources such as parental attention, space and privacy, relating to someone without a shared family history and with whom the child may have little in common, and possible sexual attraction (Walsh, 1992). Adolescents in remarried families may have to relate to a complex array of full-, half & stepsiblings within and outside of their primary household (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Hetherington (1999) found that sibling relationships in stepfamilies may be more troubled and less warm than those in non-stepfamilies. Lutz's (1983) sample of 103 adolescents revealed that having stepsiblings meant experiencing higher levels of stress. White's (1994) findings support and elaborate on Lutz's findings by revealing that parental remarriage and the subsequent formation of a stepfamily are associated with greater stress in nearly all family subsystems, including between stepsiblings. Although some studies have found that conflict between stepsiblings does not appear to be excessive (Beer, 1992; White & Riedmann, 1992), a study conducted by Ferri (Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1987) revealed that adolescents in stepfamilies reported more conflict with siblings than adolescents in nuclear families. Amato (1987) found that children, especially adolescents, in stepfamilies and one-parent families, compared with children in intact families, rated their relations with siblings more negatively. Individual comparisons of sibling negativity by family type conducted by Dunn, Deater-Deckard, Pickering and O'Connor (1998) supported Amato's findings by revealing that both young children and adolescents from stepfamilies were more negative towards their siblings than children from non-stepfamilies. In addition to elevating the risk of divorce in remarriages, such stresses result in earlier launching of young adult stepchildren (White, 1994). Stepchildren are four times more likely than children from intact families to cite family conflict as the reason for leaving home (Kiernan, 1992). Further, Hetherington and Jodl (Booth & Dunn, 1994) stated that one fourth to one third of adolescent stepchildren disengage themselves emotionally and physically from their stepfamily. It is not surprising then that most researchers find stepfamilies less cohesive than intact families (Hetherington, 1999; White, 1994).

Children from multiple remarriages and cohabiting relationships may experience added complexities in sibling relationships. Studies of full, biologically related siblings from a mother's previous marriage in stepfather families find less positive, more rivalrous or disengaged sibling relationships, especially in boys, in comparison to children in nondivorced families (Booth & Dunn, 1994; Hetherington, 1989; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Close protective relationships are

found in a subset of female full siblings in stepfamilies, but boys in stepfamilies rarely receive support from either male or female siblings (Hetherington, 1989; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992).

Generally, researchers expect that the closer relationships which are usually established among biological siblings after divorce will persist into remarriage (Hetherington et al., 1999; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1987). However, research linking parental remarriage to sibling relationships is very limited and largely speculative. White and Reidmann (1992) report substantial contact between stepsiblings in adulthood, but later studies report more distant relations in adolescence. As siblings move through adolescence and young adulthood, increasing disengagement from siblings occurs as they become more involved in relationships outside of the family (Hetherington, 1999; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). This disengagement is more marked for siblings in stepfamilies (Booth & Dunn, 1994) and, in young adulthood, it is greatest for nonbiologically related stepsiblings (Hetherington, 1999). According to White and Riedmann there is, thus, some evidence that step/halfsiblings have a negative effect on contact with fullsiblings, suggesting that stepfamily dynamics may reduce family cohesion across all combinations of siblings. This suggests that the greater tension and lower cohesion in stepfamilies may result in greater centrifugal force across all family members from common residence.

Although there is some evidence that family relationships may operate differently in different family types (Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington, 1999; Hetherington & Blechman, 1996), the literature is meager. It has been established that parental remarriage can lead to increased emotional and behavioural problems in adolescent adjustment (Demo & Acock, 1996; Kurdek, et al., 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Some findings also suggest that the complex stepfamily experiences greater role confusion and higher levels of conflict which may result in poorer adjustment for children in complex stepfamilies relative to those in simple stepfamilies (Fine & Kurdek, 1992; Isaacs, 2002; MacDonald & DeMaris, 1995; Visher & Visher, 1988). Yet, little is known about how the operation of family risk and protective factors on adolescents' adjustment may vary across non-stepfamilies and different types of stepfamilies and even less is known about the influence of sibling relationships in stepfamilies on adolescent adjustment. The purpose of the present study was to investigate whether the presence of stepsiblings impacts on the adolescent's adjustment to reconstituted families and whether adolescents' adjustment to reconstituted families differs in terms of stepfamily type, with specific reference to simple and complex stepfamilies.

Method

Permission to conduct the research in the Bloemfontein Metropolis was obtained from the Free State Department of Education after which the researcher approached the principals of English medium secondary schools in Bloemfontein, Free State to obtain their permission to conduct the research in their schools. Letters were sent to the parents of all the grade 10 to 12 learners from the three schools which were willing to participate in the study, requesting their children's participation in the study.

Participants

A total of 315 learners' parents granted permission for their participation in the study and all 315 grade 10 to 12 learners from the three participating schools were tested.

For the sake of a more homogenous sample, the following were controlled: age (15 to 18 years), race (white), socio-economic status (middle-upper class), length of second marriage (exceeding two years), and absence of multiple disruptions (more than one divorce or parental death). With respect to the complex stepfamily, only adolescents who lived with at least one of their stepsiblings were included in the sample as the focus of the study is on the influence of residential stepsiblings on adolescents' adjustment to their reconstituted family.

Three hundred and fourteen of the learners' ages ranged from 15 to 18 years. One learner was excluded from the sample as a result of his advanced age. In order to control for race, all the black, coloured, Indian and Asian learners were excluded from the sample, which led to a remainder of 217 white learners. A further two learners were excluded on the basis of socio-economic status. Items pertaining to the parents' level of education and whether the respondent's family had ever received financial assistance, such as a state grant or state subsidy, were included in the biographical questionnaire to control for socio-economic status. Although these are rather weak measures of socio-economic status, the two variables acted as rough proxy for social class selection (White, 1994). Two exclusion criteria were utilised: (i) both parents had an educational level of grade 10 or lower and (ii) the family had received financial assistance. Of the remaining 215 learners, 13 were eliminated on the basis that their remarried parents (with reference to the custodial parents) had been married for less than two years. In order to control for the absence of multiple family disruptions, 28 more learners were excluded from the sample. Nine of these 28 learners' parents were deceased and the remaining 17 had either one or both parents who had been divorced more than once. Thirteen learners had to be excluded from the sample as, although they were members of complex stepfamilies, they did not have a residential stepsibling.

After controlling for the abovementioned variables, 161 learners remained. Twenty of these remaining learners were members of simple stepfamilies due to the absence of stepsiblings (only one of the partners had children from a previous marriage). Fifty of the 161 participants were from complex stepfamilies as both of the marital partners had children from a previous marriage. The complex stepfamilies were divided into three subgroups: stepfamilies in which residential stepsiblings were either of the opposite sex or the same sex or of both sexes to enable the researcher to investigate the moderating effect of sibling gender on the interaction between gender and family type on adolescent adjustment. Twenty of the 50 participants from complex stepfamilies had stepsiblings of both sexes, 16 had stepsiblings of the opposite sex, and 14 had stepsiblings of the same sex. Twenty non-stepfamilies were randomly selected from the remaining 91 learners. The total sample comprised 90 adolescents from five different family types. The sample composition is reflected in table 1.

Table 1. The sample composition

Family type	N	Percentage
Non-stepfamily	20	22.2
Simple stepfamily	20	22.2
Complex stepfamily 1	20	22.2
Complex stepfamily 2	16	17.8
Complex stepfamily 3	14	15.6
Total	90	100

Key:

Complex stepfamily 1 = participants' residential stepsiblings are of both sexes

Complex stepfamily 2 = participants' residential stepsiblings are of the opposite sex

Complex stepfamily 3 = participants' residential stepsiblings are of the same sex as the participants

With reference to the gender of the participants, 49 (54.4%) were male and 41 (45.6%) were female.

Table 2 indicates the distribution of the male and female participants from each family type.

Table 2. Frequency distribution of participants' according to family type

Family type	Male	Female	Total
Non-stepfamily	10	10	20
Simple stepfamily	12	8	20
Complex stepfamily 1	8	12	20
Complex stepfamily 2	8	8	16
Complex stepfamily 3	11	3	14
Total	49	41	90

Although the research was conducted in English medium schools, 76 (84.4%) participants indicated that their home-language was English and 14 (15.6%) indicated that they were both Afrikaans - and English-speaking.

Instruments

The Family Functioning in Adolescence Questionnaire (FFAQ) (Langley, 1994) assesses the psychosocial health of the family during the stage of having adolescent children, as perceived by the adolescent. The FFAQ was used to measure adolescent adjustment to family functioning according to six different dimensions: Structure, Affect, Communication, Behaviour Control, Value Transmission, and External Systems. Research on the development of models conceptualising the health of the family as a system which governs that of its individual members indicates these six main dimensions as determining healthy psychosocial functioning and adjustment (Langley, 1994).

This instrument was designed for adolescents between fourteen and eighteen years of age and has been standardised for the South African population. It is important to note that a high score pertains to positive family functioning and adjustment (or an aspect thereof), while a low score reflects poor adjustment and family functioning (or an aspect thereof).

The questionnaire as a whole reflects reliability coefficients higher than 0,88. It was found that the FFAQ yielded satisfactory results with regard to the determination of, inter alia, reliability, intercorrelations between the six scales and validity (Langley, 1994). The reliability of the different fields of the test was determined by means of the Kuder-Richardson Formula 8. All the scales obtained reliability coefficients higher than 0,60. Langley found the six subscale intercorrelations to be highly significant at the 0,0001 level.

A biographical questionnaire was also used to accommodate items pertaining to the participants' family type and the following control variables: age, race, socio-economic status, length of second marriage, and absence of multiple disruptions. It could also be derived from the biographical questionnaire what the gender of the participants and their stepsiblings were, as well as whether they lived together or not.

Statistical analysis

A two-way analysis of variance, with family type and gender as independent variables, was performed on each of the six subscales of the FFAQ (1994). The main effect of each independent variable on adolescent adjustment and their interaction on adolescent adjustment were determined.

Effect size was calculated as a measure of practical significance. Cohen (1977) developed the following equation to calculate effect size for a two-way analysis of variance:

$$f = \frac{\sqrt{F}}{\sqrt{n}}$$

However, this formula is best suited to ANOVAs where the n 's of all the sub-groups are equal. The gender distribution of the sample showed a difference of 12.8% between the number of males and the number of females included in the sample and the family groupings showed an even greater variation. There were only 14 participants in the group from complex stepfamilies in which stepsiblings were of the same sex as the participant. Although the absolute difference is only six, it represents a 30% smaller sub-group than the family groupings of non-stepfamilies, simple stepfamilies and complex stepfamilies in which the stepsiblings of the participant were of the same sex. When the gender and family groupings are considered together (e.g., for the interaction terms in each of the ANOVAs), the differences become even more marked. Thus, it was decided to use the proportion of variance to account for the effect size, which may be computed with the following formula:

$$R^2 = \frac{SS_{Between}}{SS_{Total}}$$

where:

R^2 = proportion of variance

SS = sum of squares

(Nolan, 2002)

According to Cohen (Nolan, 2002), the proportion of variance as the effect size may be interpreted as follows:

$R^2 = 0.01$: small effect

$R^2 = 0.06$: medium effect

$R^2 = 0.14$: large effect

All statistical analyses were done with the assistance of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) computer package (George & Mallery, 1999). In this study, due to the small sample sizes, the 5% -level of significance was used.

Results and Discussion

With reference to the descriptive statistics of the sample, 36 (40%) of the 90 participants were in grade 10, 30 (33.3%) were in grade 11 and 24 (26.7%) were in grade 12. Their ages ranged from 15 to 18 years. The frequency of each age group, as well as the percentage it represented in the sample is reflected in table 3.

Table 3. Frequency distribution of age groups

Age in ye ars	Frequency	Percentage
15	19	21.1
16	27	30.0
17	28	31.1
18	16	17.8
Total	90	100

All participants were white and were middle -upper class with respect to socio-economic status. None of the participants' families had received financial assistance in the form of a state grant or state subsidy and none of the participants were from families in which both parents had an educational level of grade 10 or lower. More than 50% of the participants' parents were graduates. Although the majority of both mothers and fathers were university graduates, more fathers than mothers attained university degrees or postgraduate qualifications. These results reiterated Parke's (2003) findings by revealing that fathers generally attained a higher level of education than mothers did. The results reflected that more mothers than fathers attained diplomas. The results of the mothers' and fathers' levels of education are reflected in tables 4 and 5.

Table 4. Frequency distribution of mothers' levels of education

Level of education	Frequency	Percentage
Grade 10	0	0.0
Grade 12	15	16.7
Diploma	24	26.6
Degree	36	40.0
Postgraduate	15	16.7
Total	90	100

Table 5. Frequency distribution of fathers' levels of education

Level of education	Frequency	Percentage
Grade 10	1	1.1
Grade 12	11	12.2
Diploma	8	8.9
Degree	47	52.2
Postgraduate	23	25.6
Total	90	100

As far as the length of the custodial parents' (the remarried parents that the participants were living with) second marriage was concerned, the results reflected an average of longer than two years (3.50 years) in all the simple and complex stepfamilies included in the sample.

With reference to the participants' siblings, the 50 participants from the complex stepfamilies had a total of 120 stepsiblings of which 92 were residential and 28 were non-residential. Of the 120 stepsiblings, 67 were stepbrothers and 53 were stepsisters. Forty-seven of the stepbrothers lived with the participants and 45 of the stepsisters could be categorised as residential stepsisters. The mean age of the male and female non-residential stepsiblings (17.49 years) was lower than that of the male and female non-residential biological siblings (20.14 years). These results are in agreement with White's (1994) findings which reflected that the increased stresses in complex stepfamilies result in the earlier launching of young adult stepchildren compared to the young adults from nuclear families. The lower mean age for non-residential stepsiblings, with specific reference to stepsisters, could, however, also be ascribed to the fact that these stepsiblings might live with the other biological parent. The results also reflected gender differences as the mean age for non-residential stepsisters (15.38 years) was lower than that of the non-residential stepbrothers (19.60 years). In comparison with the non-residential biological siblings (male and female), the results indicated that the mean age of the non-residential stepsisters was lower than that of the non-residential biological sisters (22.53 years). The results reflected the opposite for the non-residential biological and stepbrothers as the mean age for non-residential stepbrothers (19.60 years) was higher than the mean age for non-residential biological brothers (17.75 years). The mean ages for the residential biological (14.30 years) and residential stepsiblings (13.10 years) were relatively similar and, in both cases were lower than the mean ages of the non-residential siblings. A summary of the sibling types, their residency (with regard to whether they live with the participants or not) and their mean ages are reflected in table 6.

Table 6. Summary of sibling characteristics

Sibling type	Association	N of siblings	Mean age of siblings
Biological brothers	Residential	18	13.72
	Non-residential	16	17.75
	Total	34	15.62
Biological sisters	Residential	16	14.88
	Non-residential	17	22.53
	Total	33	18.82
Stepbrothers	Residential	47	13.89
	Non-residential	20	19.60
	Total	67	15.60
Stepsisters	Residential	45	12.31
	Non-residential	8	15.38
	Total	53	12.77

Adolescent adjustment

A two-way analysis of variance, with family type and gender as independent variables, was performed on each of the six subscales of the FFAQ (1994). The two-way analyses of variance pertained to the total sample of 90 participants as adolescent adjustment was measured across all five family types: non-stepfamilies, simple stepfamilies, complex stepfamilies in which stepsiblings are of the same sex as the participant, of the opposite sex or of both sexes.

Structure as an FFAQ subscale

‘Structure’, as a subscale of the FFAQ, refers to a family’s organisational structure with clear but permeable boundaries around individual members and a cohesive parental subsystem (Langley, 1994). According to Langley, it encompasses the presence of healthy models of adult authority, a model of a good marriage, the acceptance of responsibilities, internal boundaries regarding the adolescent’s need for privacy, external boundaries pertaining to the adolescent’s increasing independence from the family, and respect for and acceptance of individuality with regard to the mother- and father-adolescent relationship. A low FFAQ score on the ‘Structure’ subscale would, thus, indicate that the adolescent perceives these characteristics to be absent in the family or that the family exhibits it to a small extent.

Table 7 indicates that the mean total for boys (22.08) was higher than the mean total for girls (21.39) on this subscale. This was also the case in non-stepfamilies, simple stepfamilies, and complex stepfamilies in which stepsiblings are of both sexes. In the latter case, the mean age for boys (24.63) was significantly higher than that of the girls (20.58).

Table 7. Means and standard deviations for the subscale ‘Structure’ according to gender and family type

Structure subscale	Male		Female		Total	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Non-stepfamily	23.70	2.00	22.60	2.67	23.15	2.37
Simple stepfamily	21.58	2.45	21.38	3.38	21.30	2.77
Complex stepfamily 1	24.63	2.62	20.50	3.55	22.15	3.76
Complex stepfamily 2	19.38	3.54	21.75	3.24	20.56	3.50
Complex stepfamily 3	21.64	1.63	23.00	4.58	21.93	2.37
Total	22.08	2.93	21.61	3.28	21.87	3.08

Key:

Complex stepfamily 1 = participants’ residential stepsiblings are of both sexes

Complex stepfamily 2 = participants’ residential stepsiblings are of the opposite sex

Complex stepfamily 3 = participants’ residential stepsiblings are of the same sex as the participants

The main and interaction effects for the subscale ‘Structure’ are reflected in table 8, according to gender and family type. Table 8 indicates that there are no significant main effects for gender or family type on this subscale. A significant interaction effect of gender and family type was found on the ‘Structure’-subscales ($F(1, 80) = 3.253, p = 0.016$) at the 5% -level of significance. This suggests that the level of adjustment as measured by this subscale is different for male and female participants from different family types. Adolescent adjustment, thus, differs across family types and for male and female participants with regard to internal and external boundaries, mother- and father-adolescent relationships, roles, parental bonds and the presence of healthy role models of adult authority. As the grouping of the complex stepfamilies accommodates the gender of the stepsiblings by categorising it as either being the opposite of the participant’s gender, the same as the participant’s gender or that the stepsiblings are of both genders, the interaction effect between gender and family type indicates possible differences in adjustment due to the gender of the stepsiblings. This would seem to indicate that gender and family type interact in the ‘Structure’ variable. The effect size (0.13) for this interaction effect was relatively large.

Table 8. Main and interaction effects of gender and family type on the subscale ‘Structure’

Source	df	Mean square	F	Significance	R ²
Gender	1	1.436	0.173	0.678	0.001697
Family type	4	18.903	2.279	0.068	0.089335
Gender*Family type	4	26.973	3.253*	0.016	0.127470
Error	80	8.293			

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

A post-hoc t-test for unequal sample sizes was performed and the 1% -level of significance was used for the t-test. Table 9 indicates that, in complex stepfamilies where residential stepsiblings of both sexes were present, boys experienced a higher degree of structure than girls did. This suggests that the adjustment of boys in complex stepfamilies in which residential stepsiblings are of both sexes, is significantly better (at the 1% -level) than that of girls in terms of the ‘Structure’ domain.

Table 9. Gender differences in adjustment to family type

Family type	Gender	N	Mean	t	df	Significance
Non-stepfamily	Male	10	23.70	1.04	16.68	0.313
	Female	10	22.60			
Simple stepfamily	Male	12	21.58	-0.09	11.86	0.930
	Female	8	21.38			
Complex stepfamily 1	Male	8	24.63	2.99**	17.74	0.008
	Female	12	20.50			
Complex stepfamily 2	Male	8	19.38	-1.40	13.89	0.184
	Female	8	21.75			
Complex stepfamily 3	Male	11	21.64	-0.51	2.14	0.660
	Female	3	23.00			

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

Key:

Complex stepfamily 1 = participants' residential stepsiblings are of both sexes

Complex stepfamily 2 = participants' residential stepsiblings are of the opposite sex

Complex stepfamily 3 = participants' residential stepsiblings are of the same sex as the participants

Affect as an FFAQ subscale

This subscale comprises of a broad range of affective expressiveness including empathy (the feeling of being supported and understood by the family), mutual trust, having the liberty to share feelings (acceptability of both positive and negative feelings), emotional security and a sense of belonging, the acknowledgement/affirmation of others, and a positive and pleasant family environment (Langley, 1994).

Table 10 indicates that the mean for boys was higher than the mean for girls in three of the five family types. The mean for girls was higher than that of the boys in the complex stepfamilies in which the participants' residential stepsiblings were of the opposite sex and of the same sex as the participants.

Table 10. Means and standard deviations for the subscale 'Affect' according to gender and family type

Affect subscale	Male		Female		Total	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Non-stepfamily	23.00	3.80	22.70	4.03	22.85	3.82
Simple stepfamily	23.58	2.97	21.75	4.13	22.85	3.50
Complex stepfamily 1	24.13	3.36	20.75	3.74	22.10	3.89
Complex stepfamily 2	20.63	2.97	23.38	4.14	22.00	3.76
Complex stepfamily 3	23.18	3.43	25.33	3.79	23.64	3.48
Total	22.98	3.37	22.27	3.99	22.66	3.66

Key:

Complex stepfamily 1 = participants' residential stepsiblings are of both sexes

Complex stepfamily 2 = participants' residential stepsiblings are of the opposite sex

Complex stepfamily 3 = participants' residential stepsiblings are of the same sex as the participants

There are no significant main effects for gender or family type and no significant interaction effect of gender and family type on this adjustment subscale ($F(1, 80) = 2.035, p = 0.097$). Thus, the effect on the level of adjustment as measured by the subscale ‘Affect’ was found to be similar for male and female participants from all family types.

Table 11. Main and interaction effects of gender and family type on the subscale ‘Affect’

Source	df	Mean square	F	Significance	R ²
Gender	1	0.285	0.022	0.883	0.000239
Family type	4	8.125	0.617	0.652	0.027213
Gender*Family type	4	26.808	2.035	0.097	0.089783
Error	80	13.171			

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

Communication as an FFAQ subscale

The subscale ‘Communication’ measures clear and direct communication in the family (Langley, 1994).

The boys’ mean was higher than the mean for the girls, with regard to their adjustment as measured by the subscale ‘Communication’, in simple stepfamilies and complex stepfamilies in which the residential stepsiblings are of both sexes. With reference to the remaining three family types, the mean for the girls was the higher one. These results are reflected in table 12.

Table 12. Means and standard deviations for the subscale ‘Communication’ according to gender and family type

Communication subscale	Male		Female		Total	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Non-stepfamily	21.80	2.53	22.80	2.82	22.30	2.66
Simple stepfamily	21.42	3.12	19.88	4.22	20.80	3.58
Complex stepfamily 1	22.50	3.42	19.58	4.74	20.75	4.41
Complex stepfamily 2	19.13	4.09	21.13	3.52	20.13	3.83
Complex stepfamily 3	21.36	3.93	23.33	4.73	21.79	4.00
Total	21.29	3.45	21.00	4.06	21.16	3.72

Key:

Complex stepfamily 1 = participants’ residential stepsiblings are of both sexes

Complex stepfamily 2 = participants’ residential stepsiblings are of the opposite sex

Complex stepfamily 3 = participants’ residential stepsiblings are of the same sex as the participants

No significant main effects for gender or family type and no significant interaction effect of gender and family type were found on the subscale ‘Communication’ ($F(1, 80) = 1.495, p = 0.211$). Thus,

adolescent adjustment as measured by this subscale was found to be similar for all five family types and for male and female participants.

The results indicate that adolescents of both genders and from all five family types perceive their families to exhibit the following familial characteristics pertaining to communication to the same extent: clarity and directness, assertiveness, listening skills, positive feedback, opportunities for negotiation, problem solving, and decision making (Langley, 1994). The main and interaction effects of gender and family type on the subscale ‘Communication’ are reflected in table 13.

Table 13. Main and interaction effects of gender and family type on the subscale ‘Communication’

Source	df	Mean square	F	Significance	R ²
Gender	1	0.203	0.015	0.903	0.000165
Family type	4	15.365	1.125	0.351	0.049974
Gender*Family type	4	20.428	1.495	0.211	0.066443
Error	80	13.661			

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

Behaviour Control as an FFAQ subscale

Behaviour control as an FFAQ subscale refers to a democratic pattern of behaviour control (Langley, 1994).

In the cases of the non-stepfamilies, simple stepfamilies and complex stepfamilies in which the participants’ residential stepsiblings were of the opposite sex, the results reflected higher mean scores for the girls than for the boys. The total mean for the boys (22.14) was higher than that of the girls (21.88). These results are reflected in table 14.

Table 14. Means and standard deviations for the subscale ‘Behaviour Control’ according to gender and family type

Behaviour Control subscale	Male		Female		Total	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Non-stepfamily	22.10	2.73	22.20	2.78	22.15	2.68
Simple stepfamily	23.08	2.19	23.25	2.71	23.15	2.35
Complex stepfamily 1	23.00	2.20	20.83	3.97	21.70	3.48
Complex stepfamily 2	20.13	4.88	21.88	2.59	21.00	3.88
Complex stepfamily 3	22.00	2.97	21.33	4.73	21.86	3.21
Total	22.14	3.09	21.88	3.23	22.02	3.14

Key:

Complex stepfamily 1 = participants’ residential stepsiblings are of both sexes

Complex stepfamily 2 = participants’ residential stepsiblings are of the opposite sex

Complex stepfamily 3 = participants’ residential stepsiblings are of the same sex as the participants

There are no significant main effects for gender or family type and there is a non-significant interaction effect of gender and family type on the adjustment subscale ‘Behaviour Control’ ($F(1, 80) = 0.890, p = 0.474$). Thus, the effect on the level of adolescent adjustment as measured by the subscale ‘Behaviour Control’ was found to be similar for male and female participants from all family types. Accordingly, it can be concluded that all 90 of the participants perceive their families to exhibit a democratic pattern of behaviour control to the same extent and as it pertains to the following familial characteristics: discipline within clear limits, a balance regarding leniency and severity, democracy, behaviour control in potentially harmful situations, acknowledgement of and guidance in sexual development, exercising self-control when angry, and the encouragement of autonomy (Langley, 1994). The main and interaction effects of gender and family type on this subscale are reflected in table 15.

Table 15. Main and interaction effects of gender and family type on the subscale ‘Behaviour Control’

Source	df	Mean square	F	Significance	R ²
Gender	1	0.517	0.052	0.820	0.000590
Family type	4	10.876	1.094	0.365	0.049667
Gender*Family type	4	8.843	0.890	0.474	0.040380
Error	80	9.938			

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

Value Transmission as an FFAQ subscale

‘Value Transmission’ as an FFAQ subscale refers to parents’ transmission of ethical standards and social values to children regarding respect for other people, valuing growth and development, an overall mature philosophy of life, achievement orientation, religious values and the significance of life with regard to the adolescents’ development of their own value systems (Langley, 1994).

As indicated in table 16, the mean for the boys was lower than that of the girls, with reference to the subscale ‘Value Transmission’, in all family types except in the cases of the complex stepfamilies in which the residential stepsiblings are of both sexes or of the same sex as the participant.

Table 16. Means and standard deviations for the subscale ‘Value Transmission’ according to gender and family type

Value Transmission subscale	Male		Female		Total	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Non-stepfamily	24.10	2.28	26.00	1.83	25.05	2.24
Simple stepfamily	24.08	3.42	24.25	3.58	24.15	3.39
Complex stepfamily 1	24.50	2.88	23.17	2.86	23.70	2.87
Complex stepfamily 2	22.00	5.73	23.50	3.12	22.75	4.52
Complex stepfamily 3	23.73	2.00	23.67	3.51	23.71	2.23
Total	23.73	3.34	24.17	2.97	23.93	3.17

Key:

Complex stepfamily 1 = participants’ residential stepsiblings are of both sexes

Complex stepfamily 2 = participants’ residential stepsiblings are of the opposite sex

Complex stepfamily 3 = participants’ residential stepsiblings are of the same sex as the participants

No significant main and interaction effects of gender and family type were found on this subscale. The interaction effect of gender and family type on this subscale ($F(1, 80) = 0.774, p = 0.545$) was non-significant. Adolescent adjustment as measured by this subscale was found to be similar for all five family types and for both male and female participants. These results are reflected in table 17.

Table 17. Main and interaction effects of gender and family type on the subscale ‘Value Transmission’

Source	df	Mean square	F	Significance	R ²
Gender	1	3.657	0.363	0.549	0.004102
Family type	4	12.235	1.215	0.311	0.054891
Gender*Family type	4	7.796	0.774	0.545	0.034974
Error	80	10.073			

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

External Systems as an FFAQ subscale

‘External Systems’ refers to clear but permeable boundaries of the family in its relationship with systems outside the family systems (Langley, 1994).

The results reflected in table 19 indicate that the mean for the boys was higher than that of the girls in three of the five family types, namely non-stepfamilies, simple stepfamilies, and complex stepfamilies in which the participants’ stepsiblings are of both sexes.

Table 19. Means and standard deviations for the subscale ‘External Systems’ according to gender and family type

External Systems subscale	Male		Female		Total	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Non-stepfamily	23.80	2.35	23.50	1.27	23.65	1.84
Simple stepfamily	23.00	2.13	21.00	2.39	22.20	2.40
Complex stepfamily 1	23.88	2.95	20.58	2.27	21.90	2.99
Complex stepfamily 2	21.38	3.81	22.75	4.13	22.06	3.91
Complex stepfamily 3	22.27	3.07	22.33	2.52	22.29	2.87
Total	22.88	2.87	21.39	2.75	22.44	2.84

Key:

Complex stepfamily 1 = participants’ residential stepsiblings are of both sexes

Complex stepfamily 2 = participants’ residential stepsiblings are of the opposite sex

Complex stepfamily 3 = participants’ residential stepsiblings are of the same sex as the participants

As reflected in table 20, there are no significant main effects for gender or family type on this subscale and there is a non-significant interaction effect of gender and family type ($F(1, 80) = 1.922, p = 0.115$). Thus, the effect on adolescent adjustment as measured by the subscale ‘External Systems’ was found to be similar for male and female participants from all family types and there were no perceived differences regarding adolescents’ involvement in recreational and sporting activities, cultural activities, community activities, friends, and economic structure with reference to the adolescents’ training for economic independence and motivation towards future success (Langley, 1994).

Table 18. Main and interaction effects of gender and family type on the subscale ‘External Systems’

Source	df	Mean square	F	Significance	R ²
Gender	1	13.380	1.784	0.185	0.018629
Family type	4	9.020	1.202	0.316	0.050237
Gender*Family type	4	14.417	1.922	0.115	0.080293
Residual	80	7.501			

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study was prompted by the void in the research on adolescent adjustment to the reconstituted family, particularly regarding the influence of the presence of stepsiblings on adolescent adjustment. With the decline in the prevalence of nuclear families and the high rates of divorce and remarriage, the importance of research in this field cannot be underestimated.

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether the presence of stepsiblings impacts on the adolescent's adjustment to reconstituted families and whether adolescents' adjustment to reconstituted families differs in terms of family type.

The findings in this study generally reiterated the relatively small proportion of variance among the participants from the five types of families in the level of adjustment and no significant main effects for gender or family type were found. Thus, there appears to be a small proportion of variance in the adjustment of adolescents from nuclear families, simple stepfamilies and complex stepfamilies, regardless of the gender of the participants or their stepsiblings. These results are supportive of those reported by Amato and Keith (1991a), Hetherington and Kelly (2002) and Isaacs (2002). The presence of stepsiblings, thus, does not appear to influence the adjustment of adolescents to reconstituted families.

The only difference in this regard occurred with respect to the 'Structure' variable as a subscale of the FFAQ. The significant interaction effect of gender and family type (at the 5% -level) indicated that the level of adjustment as measured by this subscale is different for male and female participants from different family types with regard to the family's organisational structure. The results of this study indicated that the gender of the adolescent does interact with family type as an influence on adjustment to the family with specific reference to its structure. It could, thus, be postulated that the adjustment of male and female adolescents from different family types is influenced by their perception of the degree of the clarity and permeability of boundaries around individual members and the cohesion of the parental subsystem (Langley, 1994). More specifically, this suggests a possible connection to the influence of factors such as internal and external boundaries, mother- and father-adolescent relationships, roles, parental bonds and the presence of healthy role models of adult authority on adolescent adjustment. It could be postulated that a connection exists between the influence of these factors on adjustment to family type with some researchers' view of the stepfamily as less cohesive than intact families (Hetherington, 1999; White 1994). In complex stepfamilies where residential stepsiblings of both sexes were present, boys experienced a higher degree of structure than girls did. This suggests that the adjustment of boys in complex stepfamilies in which residential stepsiblings are of both sexes, is significantly better (at the 1%-level) than that of girls in terms of the 'Structure' domain. Future studies may wish to explore the influence of residential stepsiblings of both sexes on adolescent adjustment to reconstituted families at greater length through the exploration of the reasons for this gender difference.

No significant proportions of variance were found on the subscales of Affect, Communication, Behaviour Control, and External Systems, indicating that male and female adolescents do not perceive these dimensions of their families differently as based on the type of family to which they belong. This is consistent with the findings of Amato and Keith (1991a); Hetherington and Kelly (2002) and Isaacs (2002).

However, research in the field of adolescent adjustment to divorced and reconstituted families has been marked by conflicting results and opposing views. A serious limitation of this study is the small sample size which could have contributed to the small proportion of variance in the adjustment of male and female adolescents to the various family types. The relatively large proportion of variance encountered on the 'Structure' subscale suggests that there is a likelihood of more significant main and interaction effects within a larger sample.

Due to the limited scope of the study, the effect of gender and family type was not investigated as a possible interaction effect with regard to adolescents' attitudes towards their stepsiblings. Future studies may wish to explore such attitudes as a dimension of adjustment to reconstituted families.

Researchers such as Hetherington and Jodl (Booth & Dunn, 1994), Kiernan (1992), and White (1994), found that the increased stresses in complex stepfamilies such as increased family conflict resulted in the earlier launching of young adult stepchildren in comparison to young adults from nuclear families. The findings of this study support these results as the mean age for non-residential stepsiblings (17.49 years) was lower than the mean age for non-residential biological siblings (20.14 years). Although the mean age of the non-residential biological brothers was only slightly higher than the mean age of the non-residential stepbrothers, there was a relatively large difference in the mean ages of non-residential biological sisters and non-residential stepsisters. The reasons for the low mean age of non-residential stepsisters could be explored in future studies. Furthermore, the gender differences regarding the mean ages of non-residential stepbrothers and stepsister obtained in this study is another possibility for future research as the reasons for these differences in the mean ages of non-residential stepbrothers and non-residential stepsisters could also be explored.

Although the homogeneity decreased the interference of factors other than the independent variables of gender and family type and contributed to a more accurate effect size, it also limited the

generalisability of the research findings to other populations. These results should be viewed as an introduction to further investigations.

This study has contributed to a barren field as the association between sibling relationships and adolescent adjustment has rarely been explored. This is especially true for the South African context. Such research can improve family researchers' and counsellors' knowledge of the dynamics of blended families. The results of this study can serve as a foundation from which future family researchers and counsellors can seek to refine their knowledge of stepsibling relationships in order to facilitate children's, but specifically adolescents', adjustment to the complex stepfamily type.

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