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## Relationship Quality Between Stepdaughters and Stepfathers from the Children's Perspective

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# Relationship Quality Between Stepdaughters and Stepfathers from the Children's Perspective

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DOI: [10.7454/proust.v5i1.139](https://doi.org/10.7454/proust.v5i1.139)[proust.ui.ac.id](http://proust.ui.ac.id)**Jemima Christian Utami<sup>1</sup> and Fransisca Rosa Mira Lentari<sup>1\*</sup>**<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Psychology, Atma Jaya Catholic University of Indonesia*Received: October 18th, 2021**Revision Accepted: January 23rd, 2022*

## Abstract

Stepfather–stepdaughter relationship quality is linked to the child's psychological well-being and stepfamily stability. However, there is still a lack of understanding of the dynamics of these relationships among sociodemographically diverse stepfamilies including families in different cultures. The aim of this research was to explore two Indonesian young women's interpretations of the quality of their relationships with their stepfathers. The phenomenological study was conducted via interviews, and the women discussed their experiences in depth. The women's perceptions of the quality of their connections with their stepfathers were primarily influenced by their stepfathers' to build the relationships. The five dimensions of the theory of relationship quality were applied to assessing the women's relationships with their stepfathers, and both women reported their relationships as largely negative, although one did have some positive memories. Suggestions are offered for future research that can expand on these findings, for instance through collecting data from all involved biological parents and stepparents.

## Keywords

relationship quality, stepdaughter, stepfather, stepfamily, Indonesia, family studies

Stepfamilies comprise parents and their children from prior relationships who are brought together through remarriage or cohabitation (Gonzales in Kumar, 2017). Stepparenting entails the challenge of integrating family members with different connections such as biological children and parents and stepparents and stepsiblings, and the blended family has undergone changes in complexity (Gold, 2015). Stepfamilies are more prone than nuclear families to face a variety of stressors such as transitioning relationships, family traditions, and expectations; boundary ambiguity; and children's ambiguity about stepparents' roles in their lives (Jensen, Lippold, Mills-Koonce, & Fosco, 2017).

Parents' remarriage can create adjustment problems, unstable psychological well-being, and risks to child development (Gold, 2015; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Newman & Newman, 2012). Among the key changes are stepfathers' efforts to build relationships with their stepdaughters; these efforts are crucial to how children view their relationships with their stepfathers (Jensen & Pace, 2016). With the risks for children in stepfamilies, it is a challenge to form blended families that are functional and have positive impacts on children (Gold, 2015).

If children are able to have positive responses to their parents' remarriage, beneficial impacts can include greater comfort in the new family (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2002; Taylor & Taylor, 2012). Research has established that stepfamily functioning is influenced by children's perceptions of stepparents including closeness and quality of relationships (Jensen & Howard, 2015), and researchers have investigated factors that can promote children's well-

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being in stepfamilies (Jensen et al., 2017). However, despite the importance of stepparent-stepchild relationship quality for stepfamily well-being, little is known regarding the contributors to relationship quality (Ganong, Coleman, Chapman, & Jamison, 2017).

Ganong and Coleman (2017) found that some stepfamilies do not disclose their problems because of predominant cultural mores and ideologies regarding second marriages and blended families, making it difficult to conduct research. Religious views, cultures, and stigma associated with stepfamilies influence research on stepfamilies in collectivistic societies, particularly in Asia (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Webber, 2003). For example, Indonesia is a collectivist culture that views religious and social norms as core beliefs in life, and these affect stepfamilies through societal norms and religious and sociocultural values (Keshavarz & Baharudin, 2009). A Google search in Indonesia for stepfather generates news reports of murder, violence, and sexual harassment against stepdaughters. The media tends to focus on individuals and groups that are different from social norms, and stepfathers and stepdaughters are one example (Ramasubramanian & Yadlin-Segal, 2017).

Campbell and Winn (2018) argued that the father-daughter bond is crucial for a daughter's development, specifically for psychological well-being, self-concept formation, sense of security, future relationships with partners, and seeing fathers as role models (Amato & Keith, 1991; East, Jackson, & O'Brien, 2006; Zia, Malik, & Ali, 2015). Daughters' relationships with stepfathers frequently go through periods of conflict, especially during adolescence, and it can take until a woman's young adulthood before her relationship with her stepfather stabilizes (Hetherington, 1999; Hetherington & Elmore, 2003). Given this phenomenon, the researcher on the current study focused on young adult women who had known their stepfathers for at least five years.

### *Dynamics of the Quality of Daughter's Relationship with Stepfather*

Girls' transitions into new stepfamilies go through several phases. When biological parents divorce, their children are confronted with a variety of changes such as feelings of loss for the

absent parent, frequently fathers, and conflicts with one or both parents (Amato, 2010; Coleman, Ganong, & Russell, 2013; Hetherington & Elmore, 2003). Parents' subsequent remarriage introduces new sets of challenges.

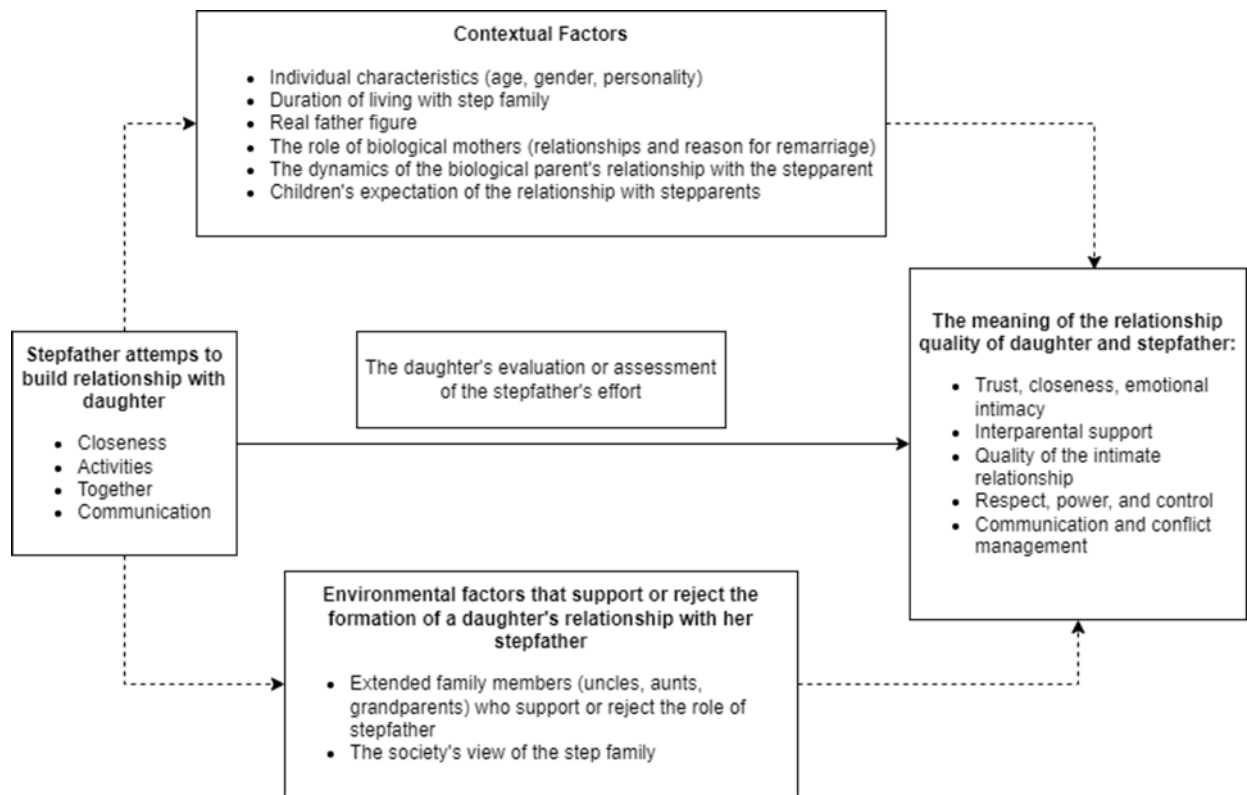
Children entering a stepfamily can have significant difficulties adjusting to their new family's conditions (Hetherington, 1999; Coleman, Ganong, & Russell, 2013; Perry-Fraser & Fraser, 2017). Forming a stepfamily requires everyone to adjust their habits, values, and beliefs regarding family life (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), and stepparents can face difficulties establishing a unified family unit when children have difficulty making these adjustments and reject the new family structure (Coleman et al., 2013). The presence of stepparents in children's lives can be a contentious experience, making it difficult to form relationships with them (Coleman et al., 2013; Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011).

Stepfather-stepdaughter relationships can be especially fraught and will be guided by the adult's efforts to relate to the child. Stepfather efforts to build positive relationships can include regularly engaging and interacting with children, supporting and accepting daughters, and not attempting to replace their biological fathers. Stepdaughters evaluate their relationships with their stepfathers based on these efforts.

In interviewing two young women with stepfathers, this researcher aimed primarily to evaluate the women's responses to their stepfathers' perceived efforts to engage with them according to the theory of relationship quality. However, evaluating the quality of relationships cannot be separated from the influences of other factors, such as individual characteristics and family contexts. Owing to time constraints, the researcher was unable to gather and analyze details about impacts of these environmental and contextual factors. The researcher instead specifically investigated how a stepfather's efforts had influenced the process of forming quality relationships with two young adult women. Figure 1 graphically displays the process of how the stepfather-stepdaughter relationship develops.

### **Methods**

Phenomenological research entails studying unique and specific cases to better understand



**Figure 1.** Developing the quality of a daughter-stepfather relationship

the characteristics of the participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative methods can describe the richness of individual contexts, in this case two women's experiences in a stepfamily situation including difficulties with their stepfathers' roles in their families. Creswell and Poth (2018) elaborated that phenomenological research allows for describing participants' lives in detail, exploring their experiences, and examining their reflections on those experiences including their impacts. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that the essence of phenomenological studies is to explain in depth the interpretation of meaning from experiences based on the participants' perspectives, not just to describe participants' experiences. Given this researcher's limited focus, the study had minimal, carefully considered participant criteria, which resulted in a small sample (Creswell, 2012).

### Measures

The researcher conducted semistructured interviews with the two study participants using guided, open-ended questions based on theoret-

ical understanding that were likely to elicit varied responses (Willig, 2013). Owing to the qualitative nature of the research, the interviews were conducted one on one (Creswell, 2012). The open-ended questions allowed participants to provide their own personal experiences and the researcher to reflect the participants' responses back to them including reflecting their perspectives (Yin, 2011); the participants shared their memories and their thoughts, and feelings about the experiences in those memories, including events related to the quality of their relationships with their stepfathers. The researcher devised the interview guide with reference to Lawrence, Brock, Barry, Langer, and Bunde's (2009) theory on relationship quality. The questions asked the participant's family background, the role of the stepfather in the participant's life, and the quality of the participant's relationship with the stepfather. The interview guide was reviewed by the research supervisor, Fransisca Rosa Mira Lentari, M.Psi., psychologist and expert advisor Danny I. Yatim, MA, ED.M.; both provided feedback during the guide's preparation.

**Table 1.** *Research Participant Characteristics*

	Participant 1	Participant 2
Pseudonym	Patricia	Fidel
Gender	Female	Female
Age (years)	24	24
Age of biological parents' divorce (years)	8 (third grade)	2
Years knowing the stepfather	7 years	14 years
When the stepfather joined the family	After high school	3rd grade

### *Participants*

The unit of analysis in this study was the individual, and the researcher selected two participants who met the following criteria:

1. post adolescent (age 18–25);
2. biological parents were divorced;
3. biological mother had later entered a relationship with a stepfather; and
4. had lived with the stepfather for at least five years.

The young woman participants were born, raised, and living in Indonesia.

### *Data Analysis*

The thematic analysis in this study focused on the theoretical basis of relationships by the researcher's examining of girls' and women's relationships with their stepfathers guided by Lawrence et al.'s (2009) five dimensions of relationship quality as reflected in the questions in the interview guide. Data analysis in phenomenological studies aims to identify and extract critical themes from study participants' responses to questions about phenomena to better understand their experiences of the phenomena, a stage referred to as horizontalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018); the critical themes are then categorized. Participants give textural descriptions of their experiences, and the researcher develops theme-based structured descriptions to explain the contexts and meanings of those participant experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Results**

#### *Research Participants*

This study involved two Indonesian participants who had been selected according to the study criteria listed above. Table 1 presents their salient characteristics. Both were 24 years old at the time of the study.

#### Patricia: Overview

Patricia is a 24-year-old woman of Betawi descent who was born in July 1995 in Tangerang; she is the youngest of four. Patricia enjoys watching football, particularly the PERSIJA football club; she stated that her interest in football had begun in the third grade of elementary school. Patricia dedicated time and energy to pursuing her passion, once even asking her boss for time off from work to attend a PERSIJA match.

Patricia attended elementary school in Jakarta and lived with her family until her parents divorced; she attended junior high and high school at a boarding school that required her to live in a dormitory at a time that coincided with her mother's remarriage. Patricia contended that her biological father had given her more freedom to express herself, whereas her mother had simply informed Patricia that she had remarried without asking for her permission. Patricia considered her birth mother's remarriage as rather irrelevant to her life and considered her stepfa-



ther her mother's companion given that she had been away at boarding school and had not grown up with him.

Patricia met her stepfather for the first time after she had graduated from high school, and the meeting happened by chance; he was at her mother's house when she came home to visit after graduation. The stepfather was revealed to be a widower with one son, and the boy became Patricia's younger stepbrother after her mother married his father; she described her relationship with her stepfather as impersonal, and she had no further information regarding his familial background. Patricia described that her stepfather had attempted to build a relationship with her after she graduated, and his efforts were ongoing at the time of the interview because she sometimes stays with her mother.

The stepfather's efforts included attempting to find topics he could talk about with Patricia, which she interpreted as attempts to get to know her. He also invited her to join the family for meals and to accompany him on activities she enjoyed such as swimming. However, Patricia had often been unable to participate in the family's activities because of school commitments, and after one incident, her stepfather no longer invited her to activities. Patricia stated that she had in fact never participated in any activities with her stepfather or her stepfamily as a group, and she had formed a negative view of her stepfather because of his actions.

Patricia describes the specific troubling incident as her stepfather's having locked her out of the house after she returned home at 3 a.m. one night; she had joined the Student Activity Unit for nature lovers during her first semester of college, and an event had kept her out late. In addition to having locked her out of the house, her stepfather scolded her for her decision to even attend college; according to Patricia, he had stated that women did not need higher education because they were destined to become housewives. After she had confronted him about locking her out of the house, Patricia had concluded that he preferred to maintain his good image among the neighbors than understand why she had needed to come home late.

The following is a description of Patricia's relationship with her stepfather based on Lawrence et al.'s (2009) five dimensions of relationship quality; although the theory was developed

related to dyadic couples, certain aspects can apply to stepparent-stepchild relationships. Patricia is not close to her stepfather on the dimensions of trust, support, and emotional intimacy; she described such a distance that they were "like meeting strangers on the street" when she came to her mother's house. She did not trust her stepfather, described him as peculiar. She had even opted not to bring her boyfriend to her mother's house because she found the stepfather disturbing.

On the dimensions of respect, power, and control, Patricia generally did not appreciate or respect her stepfather's attempts at parenting input. She criticized actions of his such as locking her out when she came home late and scolding her for asking her mother for pocket money and for going to college. In fact, she believed that he should not criticize or even comment on her actions or her life.

In terms of support, the stepfather had never been present for significant events in Patricia's life. He did not attend her high school graduation ceremony and was not available for one of the most traumatic incidents in her life, the death of her ex-boyfriend. Patricia's stepfather generally had no idea what was going on in her life. She perceived that he was only concerned with his biological child from his first marriage.

However, Patricia also observed how her stepfather cared for his son, and she believed he was not ready to be a father at all; she had observed that he seemed only able to parent a young child and had no idea to act with a teenager as well as with an adult child. Patricia also noticed that the stepfather appeared to be less financially prepared to pay for his child's schooling; she compared him with her biological father and found his parenting style deficient.

Related to the dimensions of communication and conflict resolution, Patricia reported that her stepfather never spoke to her directly but communicated through her mother, and she believed that the man should take the initiative to solve problems. She regretted that they could never resolve disagreements directly. She also hoped that he would be able to be more involved and available for communication rather than just scolding her.

### **Fidel: Overview**

Fidel is a 24-year-old Sundanese woman who lived in Bandung for most of her life; she enjoys swimming, sightseeing, and taking in the natural sites and surroundings. She has loved swimming since she was in kindergarten because she suffers from asthma and believes that swimming helps her manage her condition. Fidel failed the third grade and had to repeat it, and thus, she had taken seven years to complete elementary school; however, she had been accepted to a university to study accounting, and she had moved to Jakarta in 2016. Prior to studying in Jakarta, Fidel had worked in a variety of fields including developing quality assurance at a factory and opening a restaurant; in fact, when her restaurant continuously lost money and eventually went bankrupt, that inspired her to go to college. She was living in Jakarta with her biological father's aunt and cousin and working as a tax consultant while taking a night class.

Fidel is the elder of two siblings; her parents divorced when she was two and her brother was one. After the divorce, Fidel lived with her mother, and she has never seen her father or even her brother since then; they live in Semarang. Fidel has very few memories of her biological family because she was so young when her parents divorced. When she was still in school, she lived with her grandmother during the week because her mother had to work, and she stayed with her on weekends at a home her mother rented near work.

Fidel's mother married her stepfather when Fidel was in the third grade; she had met him when she was about to start elementary school. She had fond memories of him from when he was still dating her mother; he had played with her and shown her kindness and made it clear he expected to become her father. He took her and mother shopping at the mall and bought her dolls, and he bought her folk recordings he knew she loved. In turn, Fidel loved her stepfather and expected him to become her father. Even though she did not call him Dad, she had called him Koko (a term of endearment) since she had met him.

However, it was a significant transition for Fidel when her mother finally married her stepfather; she described it as life changing. Until

then, Fidel had been cared for by her grandmother's housekeeper and sometimes her grandmother herself, but when she moved in with her mother and stepfather, there was no housekeeper, and she had to become independent. It was these overwhelming changes that caused Fidel to fail the third grade and have to repeat it; she was not attending school because her parents were not taking care of her. She also had two half-sisters from the marriage, and her mother expected her to take care of the littler girls. Fidel remembered that her mother had once asked her to go buy groceries while she was caring for her sister K, and she had fallen and attempted to keep K from getting hurt.

Meanwhile, Fidel was surprised by how drastically her stepfather's behavior toward her had changed when he married her mother. He began attempting to be an authority figure in her life, and she described conflicts and adjustments that were ongoing to the present day. He still attempted to build a relationship with Fidel, but he also took actions that left her with a negative impression of him. For instance, he would not allow her to have a birthday party when she turned nine because the school had announced that she had not been promoted to grade 4. Instead, he had scolded her, and she still remembered it vividly.

In another incident, Fidel recalled that one evening she had been preparing her books for school the next day when out of anger he had stabbed her in the back with chopsticks. She lived with her stepfather until middle school, and she reported that she grew accustomed to his abuse because she could not understand what was being taught in math class. She said his hitting had been normal since elementary school.

In fact, Fidel had a long list of incidents with him. For several months while she was in junior high school, he would step on her uniform that she had just washed and would not admit it; she suspected that he was leaving his footprint to show her that there was only one man in the house. Another time, Fidel's stepfather waved a mouse in her face knowing that she was terrified, she accidentally kicked her half-sister, and he reacted by slapping her across the face with a sharp plastic instrument, causing Fidel to bleed.

Fidel first met her biological father when she

was in the sixth grade of elementary school. The meeting occurred because the grandfather from Fidel's biological father's side passed away. Fidel was invited along with her biological mother to the funeral home and her mother finally introduced her to her biological father.

Fidel described junior high school as a very stressful time. Her stepfather took her to the entrance exam so she could enroll in the junior high school he recommended, but when she did not pass the exam, he kicked her in the leg on the way home. He was also groping her breasts in addition to the violent abuse; he punched her in the face multiple times and slapped her after she came home later than her curfew limit. Fidel stated that she intended to report him for domestic violence.

Despite the above; however, and her description of him as irresponsible, excessively harsh in parenting, and frequently provoking conflict, Fidel believed that she had learned some things from her stepfather's parenting; for instance, he taught her etiquette such as table manners. Nevertheless, when Fidel graduated, her mother gave her a restaurant business that failed because of her stepfather's stealing; when he sabotaged her restaurant, Fidel moved to Jakarta to continue her education. Her stepfather blocked her number, and because he and her mother shared a phone, Fidel could not contact her mother, and her mother had to hide to call her.

The quality of Fidel's relationship with her stepfather derived from his early efforts to develop a relationship with her, being polite, friendly, and caring, but after he married her mother, his attitude changed, and their relationship grew strained. Under the five-dimensional relationship quality theory (Lawrence et al., 2009), Fidel's relationship with her stepfather was conflicted on the dimensions of trust, closeness, and emotional intimacy. She felt uncomfortable around him and believed that he had been harmful to her, which caused her not to trust him despite her fond memories of feeling close to him on vacations.

Regarding the dimension of support, Fidel perceived that her stepfather was unsupportive of any nonacademic achievements. He did not attend her choir and angklung performances and would not pick her up from performances and competitions, instead telling her to take a

taxi. Moreover, despite his emphasis on academic achievement, Fidel's stepfather also did not attend her grade promotions, her high school graduation, or other important life moments.

In terms of intimacy, Fidel accepted her stepfather but had concluded that a rage within him made it impossible to be close to him; she also perceived his differential treatment of his biological children, Fidel's half-sisters. However, she also described feeling close to him at a time when he had had a motorcycle accident and she had helped to clean his wounds. In short, Fidel described her relationship with her stepfather as complicated.

On the dimensions of respect, power, and control, Fidel's stepfather had taken on an authoritative role when he joined the family, including involving himself in Fidel's academic performance and frequently scolding and punishing her for bad grades. Fidel did not tell people about what her stepfather was doing, but she did not respect him as the head of the household because he did not financially support them. Her mother supported their family.

Regarding communication and conflict resolution, Fidel observed that she and her stepfather had never really resolved a conflict. He never took the initiative to try, and he has resisted her efforts to communicate better. Unfortunately, Fidel believes that her communication problems with her stepfather cannot be resolved because he will not try.

### *Summary of the Findings*

In the context of the five dimensions of relationship quality, the two participants who were interviewed for this study did not have trust or emotional closeness with their stepfathers. One considered hers more like a stranger, and one had issues with hers but could still recall moments or occasions when they felt close to him. Neither participant received emotional support from her stepfather related to significant events in her life, and the participants did not accept their stepfathers as significant figures in their lives. On the dimensions of respect, power, and control, both participants were unhappy at how their stepfathers had punished them including physical discipline and reported poor communication and problem-solving on the conflict management dimension. In short, neither participant



here had a satisfactory relationship with her stepfather.

## Discussion

Based on research findings and theory, every stepfamily is unique and has its own set of problems (Ganong & Coleman, 2017), and researchers have identified multiple variables that affect stepfamily relationships, such as the child's individual traits, the stepfather's traits, and environmental characteristics.

The two participants in this study were introduced to their stepfathers at different ages and reported different relationships with them. However, the first and most important factor in the quality of each participant's relationship with her stepfather was the efforts he made at a relationship.

The second factor that determined stepfather-stepdaughter relationship quality was stepfathers' amount of effort. In building good quality relationships with their stepchildren, stepfathers' personalities are critical (Allan, Crow, & Hawker, 2011). How the stepfathers' position themselves and what kind of characters that they want to portray to the stepdaughters'. Both participants in the present study rated their stepfathers negatively because they showed no positive efforts to build relationships with the two participants.

The third factor that can influence the quality of a relationship with a stepfather is a child's relationship with her first family and her biological father in particular. In this study, Fidel's opinion of her stepfather including her assessments of his parenting style were undeniably viewed through the lens of her relationship with her biological father which later progresses after they were officially introduced when Fidel was on 6th grade after the grandfather died.

The fourth factor in relationship quality between a daughter and her stepfather is the biological mother's role and actions. When a new family is being constituted, children need the support of their biological parents during the transition to shape the quality of their relationships with their new stepparents (Gold, 2015). In this study, the young women's mothers had not protected them from their stepfathers or played an active role with the women's relationships with their stepfathers.

A fifth factor that can affect stepfather-stepdaughter relationships is the presence of close others who can offer support. In a study by Jensen and Howard (2015), key factors that contributed to children's perspectives on their stepparent relationships included personality traits of stepfamily members as well as support from friends, extended family members, teachers, spiritual leaders, and therapists for formal support; in this study, one participant reported the support of her grandmother and of religious teachings. Children's expectations and the opinions of society can also influence stepparent relationships (Jensen, Shafer, & Larson, 2014).

## Limitations

Despite the useful information in this study, there are several limitations to consider. The findings support previous research on negative stepparent relationships (Claxton-Oldfield & Whitt, 2004), but most of these studies have been conducted in Western cultures; data on relationships in the context of Indonesian cultural norms might not be applicable or generalizable to other cultures. Another limitation of this study is that triangulation was not possible because of a limited study time frame and because the sensitive nature of the topic made it impossible to secure three separate data sources. Cooperation and input from stepfathers would have given a complete picture of the stepfather-stepdaughter relationships under study, but divorce and remarriage still carry a negative stigma among Indonesians (Supratman, 2019). Future researchers could pursue studies that involve the stepfathers as well as conduct broader investigations as follows:

1. interviewing all stepparents and biological parents to understand the larger dynamics that affect a girl's relationship with a stepfather;
2. investigating whether Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory could apply in identifying influences on the relationship quality in stepfamilies; and
3. exploring potential contributors to girls' and women's assessments of their relationships with their stepfathers that were not considered here.

## Conclusion

Tracking their relationships against the five dimensions of relationship quality by Lawrence et al. (2009), the two participants in this study reported unsatisfactory relationships with their stepfathers along all dimensions. The stepfathers' efforts to build good relationships with the women were the main contributors to their perceptions, but the stepfathers' negative actions had had detrimental impacts on the women's perceptions. Both participants had known and/or lived with their stepfathers for more than five years, but their relationships had been clouded by conflicts. This study's findings contribute to the growing body of literature on the subject and are a starting point for further research on determinants of the quality of stepfather-stepdaughter relationships.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interest.** The author reports no potential conflicts of interest related to publishing the manuscript.

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