

## Article

# Gender and Implicit Representations of Stepparents in Adolescents and Emerging Adults

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## Abstract

The growing diversification of family structures has increased the prevalence of stepfamilies, yet implicit representations of stepfather and stepmother figures remain understudied, particularly among adolescents and emerging adults. This study examines these representations, considering the influence of gender, developmental group, and prior stepfamily experience. A cross-sectional, ex post facto quantitative design was used with 372 participants aged 15–25 (198 women, 174 men), divided into adolescents (15–18 years) and emerging adults (19–25 years). Participants completed an adapted questionnaire measuring implicit representations across three dimensions: structural-conjugal, affective-relational, and parental-functional. Exploratory factor analyses confirmed the instrument's three-factor structure for both stepfigures. Both figures were primarily associated with the parental-functional and structural-conjugal dimensions. Women assigned greater relevance to the affective-relational dimension of the stepmother figure. Participants without stepfamily experience showed more idealized representations of both figures across the affective-relational and parental-functional dimensions. Minor differences between developmental groups emerged only for the parental-functional dimension of the stepfather figure. Implicit representations of stepfathers and stepmothers remain shaped by socio-cultural processes linked to gender, parenthood, and care, reflecting persistent differential expectations regarding emotional availability and relational functions within reconstituted family contexts.

**Keywords:** stepfamilies; stepfather; stepmother; implicit representations; gender; adolescence; emerging adulthood; family diversity; social representations



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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Family Diversity and Stepfamilies

The social, economic, and cultural transformations of recent decades have fostered a growing diversification of family structures, progressively questioning the centrality of the traditional nuclear family as the sole normative reference model (Triana Pérez and Plasencia Carrillo 2025). Family diversity has moved from being perceived as an exceptional reality to becoming a common feature of contemporary family systems (Golombok 2020). This has contributed to greater flexibility in traditional conceptions of parenthood, couple relationships, and family organization, promoting greater visibility of non-conventional family models, including stepfamilies (Ganong and Coleman 2017).

The increase in separations, divorces, and subsequent partnerships has made stepfamilies an increasingly prevalent reality in society (Golombok 2016), although their social normalization coexists with relational and symbolic tensions stemming from expectations regarding family and gender roles.

Stepfamilies have existed since antiquity due to widowhood (Triana Pérez and Plasencia Carrillo 2025). Today, the vast majority are formed after a family rupture in which at least one adult in the couple has children from a previous relationship. Unlike other family models, stepfamilies tend to be formed gradually through processes of adaptation, cohabitation, and the reorganization of family bonds. In these contexts, issues such as authority, care, or the creation of affective bonds are not always clearly defined, making these families particularly complex from relational and functional standpoints (Papernow 2013, 2018). Notably, this is an exponentially growing family structure (Ajenjo-Cosp and García-Saladrigas 2016), implying that a significant portion of the population may experience some form of stepfamily living during their life cycle, reinforcing the need to understand the dynamics, representations, and meanings associated with these configurations.

In this context, Cherlin (1978) described stepfamilies as an “incomplete institution,” precisely because of the absence of clear social norms regulating relationships and functions among their members. While in traditional nuclear families, parental roles tend to be more socially delimited, in stepfamilies, many functions must be negotiated over time within daily cohabitation.

This ambiguity particularly affects stepfathers and stepmothers. Both figures tend to build their place within the family gradually, negotiating boundaries, responsibilities, and affective bonds in scenarios where expectations may be ambiguous or even contradictory (Ganong and Coleman 2004). Recent research continues to indicate that stepfamilies constitute particularly complex spaces of identity and relational negotiation, where traditional expectations about parenthood and gender continue to carry significant weight (Sanner et al. 2020).

### 1.2. Social Representations and Symbolic Construction of Reconstituted Figures

Family figures are constructed not solely from personal experience but also through socially shared meanings. According to the theory of social representations, people develop interpretive systems that enable them to understand reality and to orient their expectations, beliefs, and attitudes toward certain social phenomena (Moscovici 1984; Rateau et al. 2012). In this sense, the implicit representations of stepfathers and stepmothers are shaped by social discourses, cultural narratives, and socialization processes that cognitively organize the meanings attributed to these family figures.

Analyzing these representations is particularly relevant because they directly influence the expectations and relational dynamics that people establish within family systems (Rodrigo and Palacios 1998). In stepfamilies, beliefs about stepfathers and stepmothers can facilitate or hinder family adaptation, shaping how their roles, boundaries, and responsibilities are interpreted.

However, representations of stepfathers and stepmothers do not appear to be constructed in the same way. The stepmother figure has historically been associated with negative and stereotyped images in traditional tales, cultural narratives, and social discourses, which portray her as marked by affective rivalry, emotional coldness, or a lack of care (Claxton-Oldfield 2008, 2000). These narratives have continued to be reproduced in contemporary audiovisual productions, where the stepmother tends to appear associated with conflict, affective threat, or emotional competition.

The stepfather's representation, in contrast, tends to be linked to more structural, organizational, or instrumental functions within the family. This symbolic difference

reveals how certain cultural imaginaries continue to shape people's interpretations and evaluations of new family configurations.

In sum, stepfamilies offer a particularly interesting context for analyzing how contemporary changes in family models coexist with traditional representations about parenthood, family legitimacy, and affective bonds. Although family diversity has gained social visibility, differentiated expectations regarding men and women within family dynamics persist, especially in configurations distant from the traditional nuclear model (Jensen and Sanner 2021).

### *1.3. Gender, Care, and Parenthood in Stepfamilies*

The observed differences between representations associated with stepfathers and stepmothers also reflect the persistence of gender mandates related to care and parenthood. According to social role theory, emotional and care functions are still more frequently associated with women, whereas normative, organizational, or instrumental functions tend to be associated with men (Eagly and Wood 2012).

The literature on gender and parenthood has shown that care-related responsibilities and emotional involvement remain unequally distributed between men and women (Deutsch 2007; González Rodríguez 2009). Even in family contexts characterized by greater structural diversity, women continue to be evaluated by greater affective and relational demands, especially regarding emotional care and affective availability within the family (Moreno-Mínguez et al. 2019).

In recent years, various studies have also indicated that the so-called "mental load" and invisible emotional work continue to fall disproportionately on women (Daminger 2019). This reflects that emotional and care responsibilities continue to be distributed unequally, even in family structures distant from the traditional model.

In this context, stepmothers may experience greater social pressure to assume functions culturally associated with motherhood, while stepfathers would face expectations more centered on organizational or instrumental aspects of family life.

In this line, Hays (1996) proposed that contemporary societies continue to promote an ideology of intensive motherhood based on the expectation of constant, sacrificial emotional involvement, primarily oriented toward children's well-being. Although the stepmother does not biologically occupy the maternal role, cultural demands associated with feminine care appear to extend to this family figure as well, generating particularly intense expectations regarding her affective and relational capacity.

Complementarily, Gilligan (1982), from the ethics of care perspective, noted that women tend to be socialized toward greater emotional responsibility within interpersonal relationships. From this perspective, differences between stepfathers and stepmothers would reflect not only specific family functions but also distinct sociocultural expectations about how men and women should practice care, parenthood, and emotion regulation.

### *1.4. Adolescence, Emerging Adulthood, and the Construction of Family Representations*

Adolescence and emerging adulthood, a developmental stage situated approximately between 18 and 25 years of age, represent particularly important periods in the construction of social knowledge about family and affective relationships. During these periods, people progressively reorganize their conceptions of parenthood, affective bonds, and family dynamics, integrating both personal experiences and sociocultural referents (Arnett 2000; Grossman and Richer 2022). Emerging adulthood is further characterized by greater identity exploration and deeper reflection on interpersonal relationships and family models, which could influence how reconstituted family figures are conceptualized. Similarly, prior experience of growing up in stepfamilies could promote more complex and less idealized representations of stepfathers and stepmothers. In contrast, individuals without

direct experience would tend to rely more heavily on cultural imaginaries and socially shared knowledge.

Analyzing the implicit representations associated with these family figures during adolescence and emerging adulthood helps us understand how new generations construct the meanings attributed to stepfamilies and how certain sociocultural norms related to gender, care, and parenthood continue to be reproduced—or transformed—in contemporary family contexts.

In the present study, implicit representations of stepfathers and stepmothers are examined across three complementary dimensions. The structural-conjugal dimension refers to the extent to which these figures are associated with family structure, cohabitation, and the couple relationship. The affective-relational dimension encompasses emotional closeness, affection, companionship, and the interpersonal bonds established with the partner's children. Finally, the parental-functional dimension refers to the attribution of caregiving, educational support, guidance, and non-biological parental responsibilities within the family system. Together, these dimensions provide a conceptual framework for understanding how adolescents and emerging adults cognitively organize the meanings attributed to stepfather and stepmother figures.

### *1.5. Study Objectives*

Despite the increase in research on stepfamilies over recent decades, studies specifically focused on implicit representations associated with stepfather and stepmother figures in adolescent and emerging adult populations remain scarce. Most previous work has focused primarily on structural aspects, family dynamics, or relational adjustment, with fewer studies analyzing how new generations cognitively construct the meaning attributed to these family figures from sociocultural and gender perspectives. Therefore, the present study aims to analyze implicit representations of stepfather and stepmother figures in adolescents and emerging adults, examining the influence of gender, developmental group, and prior stepfamily experience.

Drawing on prior literature on stepfamilies, social representations, and gender, it was hypothesized that implicit representations associated with stepfather and stepmother figures would be organized primarily around structural-conjugal and parental-functional dimensions. In contrast, the affective-relational dimension was expected to occupy a less central position in these conceptualizations. Likewise, it was expected that both family figures would be represented differently from symbolic and relational standpoints. Specifically, the stepfather was hypothesized to be primarily associated with organizational, normative, and instrumental functions within the family system, whereas the stepmother was hypothesized to be more linked to emotional, affective-relational, and care dimensions, consistent with gender expectations traditionally associated with feminine parenthood.

Similarly, it was expected that women would assign greater relevance to affective-relational dimensions associated with reconstituted family figures, especially the stepmother figure, due to the persistence of gender socialization processes related to care, emotion regulation, and affective involvement within the family domain.

Furthermore, it was hypothesized that individuals with prior stepfamily experience would exhibit more complex and less idealized representations of stepfather and stepmother figures than those without direct experience in this family structure, who would tend to rely more heavily on cultural imaginaries and shared social representations.

Finally, it was expected that emerging adults would exhibit more complex and functional representations of reconstituted family figures than adolescents, particularly in the structural and parental dimensions, due to greater reflection on family relationships, cohabitation, and the organization of affective bonds during this developmental stage.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Participants

The present study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional, ex post facto design, using non-probabilistic incidental sampling.

The sample included 372 participants aged 15–25 years, recruited from various secondary education centers, vocational training programs, and universities in the Canary Islands (Spain). Following Arnett's (2000) developmental proposal on emerging adulthood as a differentiated developmental stage, two developmental groups were established: adolescents (15–18 years) and emerging adults (19–25 years). Participants were recruited in educational settings and voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. The sample included both individuals with previous experience of living in a stepfamily and those without such experience, allowing comparisons according to this variable. The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Sample.

| Variable                          | <i>n</i> (%) / <i>M</i> (SD) |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>Gender</b>                     |                              |
| Women                             | 198 (53.2%)                  |
| Men                               | 174 (46.8%)                  |
| <b>Developmental group</b>        |                              |
| Adolescence                       | 162 (43.5%)                  |
| Age (adolescents)                 | 16.75 (1.12)                 |
| Emerging adulthood                | 210 (56.5%)                  |
| Age (emerging adults)             | 22.46 (1.68)                 |
| <b>Experience with stepfamily</b> |                              |
| With experience                   | 168 (45.2%)                  |
| Without experience                | 204 (54.8%)                  |

No significant differences were found in gender distribution,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.559$ ,  $p = 0.455$ , or by age group,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.449$ ,  $p = 0.063$ , according to stepfamily experience.

### 2.2. Measures

An ad hoc sociodemographic questionnaire was developed to collect information on age, gender, and prior stepfamily experience. Additionally, a questionnaire previously developed as part of research on representations associated with the concepts of stepfather and stepmother (Plasencia Carrillo 2016) was employed. The original instrument was developed through a multi-stage process. First, a review of the literature on stepfamilies was conducted to identify the main conceptual domains associated with the concepts of stepfather and stepmother. Subsequently, a pilot group of adolescents and emerging adults provided open-ended definitions of these family figures. Their responses were qualitatively categorized to identify the main underlying dimensions, which served as the basis for item development. The resulting questionnaire was then administered to a larger sample of adolescents and emerging adults to examine its dimensional structure. In the present study, the instrument was reused, and its psychometric properties were re-examined to confirm its factorial structure and internal consistency in the current sample.

The questionnaire initially comprised 12 items formulated in parallel for both family figures. Participants indicated their degree of agreement with various definitions of the

stepfather and stepmother using a Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree). Items addressed aspects related to cohabitation, affective bonding, parental functions, and structural membership in the family system.

Descriptive statistics for items associated with implicit representations of the stepfather and stepmother concepts are presented in Table 2. The highest levels of agreement were observed for definitions linked to the structural and parental functions of the reconstituted figures—particularly items related to cohabitation, family membership, and parental performance. The lowest levels of agreement were recorded for items associated with the imposition of parental authority, with low scores for both family figures.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics for questionnaire items on stepfather and stepmother.

| Item                                                                                                                                                      | Stepfather M (SD) | Stepmother M (SD) |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Is a man/woman married or in a stable union with a widowed mother/father who has children, and he/she is not their biological father/mother            | 7.81 (2.35)       | 7.67 (2.40)       |
| 2. Is a man/woman who loves their partner's children                                                                                                      | 6.56 (2.75)       | 6.58 (2.73)       |
| 3. Is a man/woman who is one more family member                                                                                                           | 5.46 (3.12)       | 5.33 (3.11)       |
| 4. Is a man/woman who performs parental functions with the children of their divorced partner, and he/she is not their biological father/mother           | 7.68 (2.45)       | 7.40 (2.63)       |
| 5. Is a new father/mother or new spouse of a widowed or single person who has children, and he/she is not their biological father/mother                  | 6.79 (2.63)       | 6.57 (2.66)       |
| 6. Is a man/woman who is a companion and friend to the children of their partner                                                                          | 6.21 (2.76)       | 6.21 (2.84)       |
| 7. Is a man/woman who tries to impose themselves as father/mother with their new partner's children                                                       | 2.98 (2.84)       | 3.03 (2.84)       |
| 8. Is a man/woman married to a widowed or single mother/father who has children, and he/she is not their biological father/mother                         | 7.44 (2.33)       | 7.44 (2.38)       |
| 9. Is a man/woman who lives with a father/mother who has children, and he/she is not their biological father/mother                                       | 6.65 (2.64)       | 6.54 (2.66)       |
| 10. Is a man/woman who helps in the care of children, and he/she is not their biological father/mother                                                    | 6.14 (2.79)       | 6.18 (2.77)       |
| 11. Is a man/woman who makes their partner's children happy and loves them, and he/she is not their biological father/mother                              | 6.71 (2.72)       | 6.72 (2.73)       |
| 12. Is a man/woman who performs parental functions with the children of their widowed or single partner, and he/she is not their biological father/mother | 7.50 (2.55)       | 7.47 (2.63)       |

To analyze the instrument's internal structure, independent exploratory factor analyses (EFA) were conducted for the stepfather and stepmother scales, using minimum-residual extraction and oblique Promax rotation. An oblique rotation was selected because moderate correlations among the extracted dimensions were expected. Sample adequacy was previously examined using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) index and Bartlett's test of sphericity, obtaining adequate values for conducting the factor analyses.

Factor retention was determined by jointly considering eigenvalues greater than 1, the scree plot, and parallel analysis following Horn's (1965) criterion, also prioritizing the conceptual coherence and theoretical interpretability of the factorial solution. Results supported an equivalent three-factor structure for both scales.

Following initial analyses, Item 7 was removed due to its low factorial fit and limited conceptual coherence with the remaining dimensions. The conceptual structure and factor loadings are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Factor structure of the questionnaire.

| Dimension            | Conceptual Definition                                                                     | Items          | Factor Loadings |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Structural-conjugal  | Association of the reconstituted figure with cohabitation, marriage, and family structure | 1, 5, 8, 9, 10 | 0.675–0.816     |
| Affective-relational | Association with emotional and relational functions                                       | 2, 3, 6, 11    | 0.591–0.745     |
| Parental-functional  | Association with non-biological parental functions                                        | 4, 12          | 0.786–0.893     |

For the stepfather scale, sampling indices were satisfactory (KMO = 0.784; Bartlett's test:  $\chi^2(55) = 1281.733$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Factor analysis identified three distinct dimensions that jointly explained 63.34% of the total variance, with intercorrelations ranging from 0.153 to 0.325. The identified dimensions were structural-conjugal ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ), affective-relational ( $\alpha = 0.72$ ), and parental-functional ( $\alpha = 0.77$ ). All demonstrated adequate internal consistency.

Regarding the stepmother figure, sampling indices also showed adequate values (KMO = 0.763; Bartlett's test:  $\chi^2(55) = 1581.731$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Factor analysis identified three distinct dimensions that jointly explained 65.69% of the total variance. As in the stepfather scale, the identified dimensions were structural-conjugal ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ), affective-relational ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ), and parental-functional ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ), all demonstrating adequate internal consistency. In both scales, dimension scores were calculated as the mean of the items belonging to each factor.

### 2.3. Procedure

Data were collected through the administration of paper questionnaires across various secondary education centers, vocational training programs, and university degree programs. For access to the adolescent sample, prior contact was established with the management teams and guidance departments of participating educational centers. For emerging adults, questionnaire administration was conducted through collaborating faculty across various university degrees and higher vocational training programs.

Questionnaire administration took place in a classroom setting under homogeneous conditions. Adolescent participants completed the survey in the presence of the research team, who provided instructions on the response procedure and resolved any doubts. For emerging adults, questionnaires were administered by faculty who had been previously informed about the study administration conditions.

Sociodemographic data on age, gender, and stepfamily cohabitation experience were collected first. Subsequently, the questionnaire on implicit representations of stepfather and stepmother described above was administered. Average completion time was approximately 15–20 min.

Participation was voluntary, and no economic compensation was offered. No names or identifying information were collected, ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of responses throughout data collection and processing. Participants were informed about the general objectives of the research and their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles set forth in the Declaration of Helsinki for research involving human subjects. After receiving general information about the study, all participants provided informed consent. The Research Ethics Committee of the university approved the study.

## 2.4. Statistical Analyses

Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 31.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA) and Jamovi, version 2.6 (The Jamovi project, Sydney, Australia). First, descriptive statistics were calculated to examine the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample and the distribution of dimensions associated with implicit representations of the stepfather and stepmother. Additionally, skewness and kurtosis were analyzed to assess the suitability of the distributions for parametric analyses.

Subsequently, EFA with Promax oblique rotation and Kaiser normalization was conducted to examine the instrument's internal structure. Factor retention was determined by jointly considering eigenvalues, the scree plot, and parallel analysis (Horn 1965). Internal consistency indices were also calculated for each identified dimension.

Independent-samples *t*-tests were then conducted to analyze differences in implicit representations across gender, developmental group, and prior stepfamily experience. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's *d*. Following Cohen's (1988) criteria, small ( $d = 0.20$ ), medium ( $d = 0.50$ ), and large ( $d = 0.80$ ) effect sizes were considered.

Finally, comparative analyses were conducted between representations associated with stepfather and stepmother figures. A statistical significance level of  $p < 0.05$  was considered in all analyses.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Descriptive Statistics and Comparisons Between Family Figures

Descriptive statistics for dimensions associated with implicit representations of stepfather and stepmother are presented in Table 4. In both family figures, the highest scores were observed in the parental-functional dimension, followed by structural-conjugal and, finally, affective-relational. Skewness and kurtosis values indicated that the distributions were suitable for parametric analyses.

**Table 4.** Descriptive Statistics for Dimensions associated with implicit Representations of Stepfather and Stepmother.

| Dimension            | Stepfather M (SD) | Stepmother M (SD) |
|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Structural-conjugal  | 6.97 (1.92)       | 6.88 (2.00)       |
| Affective-relational | 6.24 (2.09)       | 6.21 (2.16)       |
| Parental-functional  | 7.59 (2.26)       | 7.43 (2.43)       |

Comparative analyses showed slightly higher scores for the stepfather figure than for the stepmother in the structural-conjugal and parental-functional dimensions, while no relevant differences were observed in the affective-relational dimension.

### 3.2. Differences by Sociodemographic Variables

Regarding prior stepfamily experience, individuals without experience showed significantly higher scores in the affective-relational dimension,  $t(365) = -2.04$ ,  $p = 0.04$ ,  $d = -0.21$ , and parental-functional dimension,  $t(365) = -3.03$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ,  $d = -0.31$ , associated with the stepfather figure. No significant differences were observed in the structural-conjugal dimension.

Regarding the stepmother figure, individuals without stepfamily experience obtained significantly higher scores in the structural-conjugal dimension,  $t(365) = -2.40$ ,  $p = 0.017$ ,  $d = -0.25$ ; affective-relational dimension,  $t(365) = -2.15$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ,  $d = -0.22$ ; and parental-functional dimension,  $t(365) = -2.92$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ,  $d = -0.30$ .

Regarding gender, significant differences were only observed in the affective-relational dimension of the stepmother figure, where women scored higher than men,  $t(365) = 2.24$ ,

$p = 0.026$ ,  $d = -0.23$ . No significant differences were found for the remaining dimensions associated with the stepfather or stepmother figures.

Regarding the developmental group, significant differences were found only in the parental-functional dimension associated with the stepfather figure, with slightly higher scores among emerging adults than among adolescents,  $t(365) = -1.92$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ,  $d = -0.20$ . No significant differences were identified for the remaining dimensions evaluated.

#### 4. Discussion

The present study aimed to analyze implicit representations of stepfather and stepmother figures among adolescents and emerging adults, considering the influence of gender, developmental group, and prior stepfamily experience. The results indicate that both family figures were represented primarily through parental-functional and structural-conjugal dimensions, while affective-relational dimensions occupied a secondary position. This suggests that reconstituted figures continue to be interpreted mainly through the family's organizational and functional logic, rather than through the construction of deep emotional bonds.

From a sociocultural perspective, the results reflect that, despite the growing normalization of family diversity, stepfamilies remain characterized by certain ambiguities regarding the roles, boundaries, and responsibilities their members must assume. In this sense, stepfathers and stepmothers appear to continue occupying relational positions less defined than those associated with traditional parenthood, especially regarding the construction of affective bonds and recognition of their place within family dynamics (Cherlin 1978). The findings are consistent with recent research describing stepfamilies as spaces of constant negotiation, where family relationships are progressively and flexibly constructed, in a continuous balance between cohabitation, care, and emotional legitimacy (Ganong and Coleman 2017; Sanner et al. 2020).

Results also suggest nuances between representations associated with the stepfather and the stepmother. Although both figures were evaluated in a relatively similar manner, the stepfather appeared slightly more strongly linked to organizational, cohabitational, and instrumental functions within the family. The stepmother, conversely, was associated more with emotional and affective aspects.

Thus, while the stepfather appears to be perceived primarily as a structural or cohabitational support figure, the findings suggest that the stepmother may face greater emotional and relational demands. Her evaluation may depend not only on her involvement in family cohabitation but also on her capacity to foster affective closeness, emotionally sustain bonds, and respond to culturally associated care demands. This interpretation is also consistent with previous research showing that stepmothers are more likely than stepfathers to assume primary caregiving responsibilities within stepfamilies, reflecting the persistence of gendered expectations regarding care and parenting. Hadfield and Nixon (2012) found that, in their sample, stepmothers were considerably more likely to act as primary caregivers, whereas none of the stepfathers assumed this role. These findings support the idea that stepmothers continue to face greater expectations regarding emotional involvement and caregiving within reconstituted family contexts.

In this regard, the findings are consistent with research indicating that women continue to be socially evaluated with greater demands for affective and emotional availability within the family domain (Hays 1996; Moreno-Mínguez et al. 2019). Similarly, various studies have shown that emotional burden and invisible care work continue to fall disproportionately on women, even in family contexts characterized by increasing structural diversity (Daminger 2019). From this perspective, stepfamilies constitute a particularly significant scenario

for observing how certain traditional gender conceptions continue to be reproduced and adapted in contemporary family dynamics.

The relevance attributed to affective-relational dimensions associated with the stepmother may also be linked to the persistence of cultural imaginaries that continue to shape how this figure is socially interpreted. Unlike the stepfather, whose cultural representation tends to be linked to more functional or cohabitational aspects, the stepmother continues to occupy a particularly ambivalent position within the family imaginary. Traditional cultural narratives have tended to associate her with affective rivalry, emotional coldness, or relational conflict, generating especially demanding representations regarding her emotional legitimacy within the family (Claxton-Oldfield 2008, 2000).

Consequently, the present finding suggests that reconstituted family figures do not appear to be evaluated solely from direct interpersonal experience but also from cultural and symbolic frameworks that establish which forms of care, affectivity, and parenthood are considered legitimate or socially acceptable. In this line, recent research on family diversity has shown that family configurations distant from the traditional model continue to face unequal processes of social recognition and symbolic legitimacy (Raley and Sweeney 2020).

Gender differences reinforce this interpretation. Women obtained higher scores on the affective-relational dimension associated with the stepmother figure, suggesting greater attention toward emotional and care aspects involved in family cohabitation. This result suggests that family representations remain partially organized around differentiated attributions for men and women regarding the exercise of parenthood and emotion regulation.

Another relevant finding was that individuals without prior stepfamily experience exhibited more positive and idealized representations of both stepfather and stepmother, particularly in the affective-relational and parental-functional dimensions. This suggests that implicit representations of these family figures depend not exclusively on direct experience, but also on cultural imaginaries, social narratives, and shared knowledge that cognitively organize the meaning attributed to these family relationships (Moscovici 1984; Rateau et al. 2012). Conversely, those who had lived in stepfamilies appeared to show more complex and less idealized representations, likely as a consequence of daily experience and real negotiation of bonds, functions, and boundaries within this type of family structure.

Regarding the developmental group, the limited differences observed between adolescents and emerging adults suggest that these representations are relatively stable across both stages. However, emerging adults showed slightly higher scores on the parental-functional dimension associated with the stepfather, which may reflect a more complex understanding of the organizational and cohabitational responsibilities inherent in family relationships. Emerging adulthood is a stage characterized by greater reflection on cohabitation, couple relationships, and parenthood (Arnett 2014), which may promote less idealized and more realistic representations of daily family life dynamics.

Overall, the findings suggest that implicit representations of stepfathers and stepmothers continue to be mediated by sociocultural processes linked to gender, parenthood, and meanings attributed to care, despite contemporary family pluralization. From this perspective, the present study contributes to broadening our understanding of how adolescents and emerging adults interpret reconstituted family figures by adopting an approach centered on implicit meanings and symbolic constructions associated with these figures.

Furthermore, the evidence suggests that stepfamilies remain particularly relevant contexts for analyzing how certain social expectations linked to gender, care, and parenthood continue to organize contemporary family dynamics. The observed differences between stepfathers and stepmothers may reflect not only distinct ways of exercising parenthood but also differentiated social expectations regarding care, affectivity, and emotional availability.

These results also have important practical implications. In the educational domain, they highlight the need to incorporate diverse family models in school materials, institutional discourses, and affective education programs, fostering more inclusive and less stereotyped representations of contemporary families. Similarly, in clinical and family intervention contexts, understanding the implicit expectations associated with stepfathers and stepmothers can inform support strategies that are more sensitive to the emotional, relational, and identity tensions experienced by many stepfamilies.

## 5. Conclusions

The present study provides original evidence on how implicit representations of stepfather and stepmother figures in adolescents and emerging adults continue to be shaped by sociocultural processes linked to gender and parenthood. Both figures are primarily conceived through parental-functional and structural-conjugal dimensions, while the emotional dimension remains secondary. The findings suggest greater emotional and relational expectations associated with the stepmother figure. Participants without stepfamily experience tend to hold more idealized representations, suggesting the important role of cultural imaginaries in constructing knowledge about these family figures.

These findings have relevant implications for educational and clinical practice, emphasizing the need for more inclusive representations of family diversity. Future research should address these questions through longitudinal designs and qualitative methodologies and explore the role of cultural discourses and audiovisual narratives in shaping representations of reconstituted family figures.

However, this study presents some limitations. The cross-sectional design prevents establishing causal relationships among the variables analyzed. The use of an incidental sample also limits the generalizability of results to other populations and sociocultural contexts. In addition, relevant contextual variables, such as family composition, parental educational level, socioeconomic background, and more detailed characteristics of participants' stepfamily experiences, were not collected. Future research should incorporate these variables to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors associated with implicit representations of stepparents. Although the instrument showed adequate psychometric indicators, future research could deepen the confirmatory validation of the factor structure obtained and analyze potential transcultural differences in representations of stepfathers and stepmothers.

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