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Stepfamily Effects on Early Home-Leaving: The Role of Conflict and Closeness

Objective: This study examined the role of stepfamily experiences on early home-leaving with detailed measures for stepfamily experiences that capture levels of closeness and conflict, and with a detailed measure for home-leaving that captures pathways out of the home.

Background: Young adults raised in stepfamilies leave home and form unions earlier than young adults raised in single-parent families. Little is known about the reasons for this difference. This study examined two potential explanations—conflict and lack of closeness in the stepparent-stepchild relationship.

Method: This study was based on Dutch OKin data (Ouders en Kinderen in Nederland; Parents and Children in the Netherlands) on 3,566 young adults from separated families. Multinomial logistic regression analyses were used to estimate effects of stepfamily experiences on different pathways of early home-leaving. Stepfamily experiences were measured with the level of closeness and conflict in the stepparent-stepchild relationship.

Results: The results showed that young adults from stepfamilies were more likely to enter trajectories of both early home-leaving and early union formation. Yet this effect was limited to those having a distant or conflicted relationship with their stepparent.

Conclusion: These findings demonstrate the role of the stepparent in the home-leaving process and the heterogeneity in stepparent effects.

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Key Words: divorce, parent-child relationships, stepfamilies, young adulthood.

INTRODUCTION

An increasing proportion of children grow up in separated families (Thomson, 2014). Experiencing parental separation in childhood has effects over the life course (Amato, 2000; Cherlin, Kiernan, & Chase-Lansdale, 1995; Raley & Sweeney, 2020). A well-established finding in this literature is that children from separated families are more likely to leave home early than children from two-parent families (Aquilino, 1991; Blaauboer & Mulder, 2009;

Cooney & Mortimer, 1999; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1998; van den Berg, Kalmijn, & Leopold, 2018a). This effect of family structure on leaving home depends on whether the parent repartners. Several studies suggest that young adults who have grown up in stepfamilies are more likely to leave early than young adults who have grown up in a single-parent family (Aquilino, 1991; Blaauboer & Mulder, 2009; Cherlin et al., 1995; Kiernan, 1992; van den Berg et al., 2018a).

Early leaving among young adults from stepfamilies is often envisioned as the result of a problematic stepparent-stepchild relationship (e.g., Mitchell, Wister, & Burch, 1989). However, previous research has not tested this explanation because of data limitations. Previous studies on family structure and early home-leaving used datasets with only few individuals from stepfamilies or without information on the quality of the stepparent-child relationship in youth. A deeper understanding of the differences in early home-leaving between young adults from single-parent and stepfamilies is important in light of the higher chance of living in poverty, weaker ties to parents, and lower educational attainment among early home leavers (Aassve, Davia, Iacovou, & Mazzuco, 2007; Leopold, 2012; Oksanen, Aaltonen, & Rantala, 2016; Tosi, 2017; White & Lacy, 1997).

In this study, we zoom in on differences in early home-leaving between young adults from stepfamilies and those from single-parent families. We make two contributions to the literature. First, we recognize the heterogeneity in the stepparent-child relationship quality and the diverse roles that stepparents can have in the lives of their stepchildren. Stepfamilies are “incompletely institutionalized” (Cherlin, 1978)—there are few guidelines and norms around the role of the stepparent (Ganong & Coleman, 2006; van Houdt, Kalmijn, & Ivanova, 2018). As the role of the stepparent is not clearly defined and kinship ties are not automatically formed, there is more variability in the quality of stepparent-child ties than in other family ties (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). We go beyond previous studies by testing heterogeneous stepparent effects with measures on two dimensions of stepparent-child relations: closeness and conflict.

Second, we examine whether stepfamily experiences affect the pathway out of the

parental home. Young adults from stepfamilies may experience a lack of intimacy and leave home early in search of intimacy outside of the parental home. For them, leaving home coincides with moving in with a partner at a young age, either directly upon or shortly after leaving home. This could be the start of a pattern of early and less stable life course transitions among young adults from stepfamilies (Cherlin et al., 1995). Early union formation takes place in a phase in which life is not stable (Oppenheimer, 1988), making these unions more vulnerable to dissolution than unions formed later in life (Dronkers & Härkönen, 2008; Engelhardt, Trappe, & Dronkers, 2002; Gähler, Hong, & Bernhardt, 2009). As union dissolution is associated with disadvantages over the life course such as poverty and lower well-being (Amato, 2000, 2010), early home-leaving followed by early union formation could be seen as a more “problematic” route out of the home.

In this paper, we examine the effect of stepfamily experiences on early home-leaving and union formation among young adults in the Netherlands. Our goal is to add to knowledge about the role of stepparents in the home-leaving process. Are young adults from stepfamilies more likely to leave early compared to young adults from single-parent families regardless of the quality of the stepparent-child relationship, or does the effect of having a stepparent depend on levels of closeness and conflict in the stepparent-child relationship? And does having a stepparent affect the pathway by which young adults leave the parental home at a young age? We study these questions with newly collected OKiN data (*Ouders en Kinderen in Nederland*; Parents and Children in the Netherlands) (Kalmijn et al., 2018), a large-scale survey among young adults and their parents in the Netherlands. We restrict our analyses to young adults whose parents have separated in the child’s youth, before age 18. The data are especially suitable for our aims because they include an oversample of adult children from stepfamilies and contain information on the quality of the stepparent-child relationship in youth. We are the first in the literature on leaving home to use such a large dataset of stepfamilies and to measure both closeness and conflict in the stepparent-child relationship before leaving home.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Previous Research

Research on the consequences of parental separation shows that the life courses of young adults from separated families differ from those of young adults from two-parent families. Overall, young adults from separated families move into adult roles at a younger age. They are more likely to experience early home-leaving (e.g., Aquilino, 1991; Cooney & Mortimer, 1999; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1998; van den Berg et al., 2018a), early union formation (Cherlin et al., 1995), and union instability (e.g., Amato & Patterson, 2017; Dronkers & Härkönen, 2008).

Although the effect of parental separation on these early life course outcomes is well-documented, relatively little is known about the role of stepparents. Instead, most previous studies on stepparent effects focus on children's well-being and stepparent-child relationships. These studies have shown that the stepparent-child relationship is more likely to be strained than the resident parent-child relationship (Amato, 1987; Golish & Coughlin, 2002; Kalmijn, 2013; King, 2006, 2009; Sweeney, 2010), and that children in these families do not fare better than those in single-parent families in terms of well-being (e.g., Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Sweeney, 2010).

In this study, we combine these two lines of research. Several studies suggest that young adults from stepfamilies are more likely to leave home early compared to young adults from single-parent families (Aquilino, 1991, 1996; Blaauboer & Mulder, 2009; Cherlin et al., 1995; Kiernan, 1992; van den Berg et al., 2018a; Young, 1987). Few studies have tested the effects of stepfamily experiences on the pathway out of the home. Whereas one study suggests that young adults from stepfamilies are more likely to leave home with a partner (Blaauboer & Mulder, 2009), another study found that they are not more likely to leave home early for marriage (Aquilino, 1991). These mixed findings could be attributed to the focus on marriage instead of cohabitation in the latter study.

Little is known about explanations for early home-leaving among young adults from stepfamilies. One previous study found that having a partner and residential mobility

account for about 20% of the difference in early home-leaving between step- and two-parent families (van den Berg et al., 2018a, 2018b). Two early studies suggest that compared to young adults from single-parent families, young adults from stepfamilies are more likely to leave because of friction than because of a wish to live independently or to live with a partner (Kiernan, 1992; Young, 1987). In line with this finding, Bernhardt, Gähler, and Goldscheider (2005) showed that women from stepfamilies are more likely to leave home compared to young adults from two-parent families if there is conflict in the parental home. The number of stepfamilies in this study was relatively low, as only 100 young adults came from stepfamilies.

In our paper, we build on these previous studies by zooming in on the role of the stepparent. We compare young adults from stepfamilies with those from single-parent families. We benefit from the large number of young adults from stepfamilies and detailed measures of the social relationships in the parental home in our data. We use data from the Netherlands for cohorts born in the 1970s and 1980s, the first cohorts born after the divorce revolution in the 1960s. In the Netherlands, about 30% of the 15-year-olds do not live with both biological parents in the same household and about 35% of the separated parents live together with a new partner (CBS Jeugdmonitor, 2018, 2019). The rise in coparenting practices was rather late in the Netherlands, later than in the United States (Cancian et al., 2014). Hence, coparenting was uncommon and most children resided with their mother among the cohorts in our study (Poortman & van Gaalen, 2017). With median ages at leaving home being 20.5 (women) and 22.5 (men) (Billari, Philipov, & Baizán, 2001), home-leaving occurs relatively early in the Netherlands compared to other European countries, but slightly later than in the United States. Leaving home for education is less common in the Netherlands than in other countries, such as in the United States. There is no on-campus housing tradition, students live in private housing, and about 36% of the students commute to college (Hauschildt, 2015). The median age at union formation is 22.3 among women born in the 1970s (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010). This is later than in Eastern and Northern Europe, but earlier than in Southern Europe.

Theory and Hypotheses

There is considerable diversity in stepparent–child relationship quality and the role that stepparents play (Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001; Jensen, 2019; Svare, Jay, & Mason, 2004). As the stepparent is “incompletely institutionalized,” there are fewer guidelines and more uncertainty around what it entails to be a stepparent than around what it entails to be a parent (Cherlin, 1978; Mahoney, 2009; Svare et al., 2004; van Houdt et al., 2018). Whereas some stepparents remain practically strangers to their stepchildren, a considerable group of stepparents are parent-figures and have a harmonious relationship with their stepchildren (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Thomson, McLanahan, & Curtin, 1992). The quality and type of relationship with the stepparent matter for several child outcomes. For example, young adults who experienced more stepfamily stress when growing up score higher on a depression scale in young adulthood (Shafer, Jensen, & Holmes, 2017), and a good relationship with their stepparent decreases the chance of internalizing problems and depression among adolescents (Jensen & Harris, 2017; Jensen, Lippold, Mills-Koonce, & Fosco, 2018; White & Gilbreth, 2001).

In this paper, we look at conflict and closeness in the stepparent–child relationship. Both conflict and closeness shape the social environment in the parental home. Whereas the sociological literature traditionally thought of closeness and conflict as opposites, later work suggests that they are instead different dimensions of relationships (Bengtson, Giarrusso, Mabry, & Silverstein, 2002; Connidis & McMullin, 2002; Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006). A close relationship can coincide with conflict, whereas a distant relationship can coincide with a lack of conflict. By focusing both on a positive dimension of the stepparent–child relationship (closeness) and a negative dimension (conflict), we recognize the inherent complexity of the stepparent–child relationship (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991; Connidis & McMullin, 2002).

Early home-leaving among young adults from stepfamilies is often attributed to conflict in the parental home, in particular to troubled stepparent–child relations. According to the stress-hypothesis, the introduction of a stepparent requires the reorganization of family relations, creates conflict in the parental home, and results in early home-leaving (Booth,

Brinkerhoff, & White, 1984; Hill, Yeung, & Duncan, 2001; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988; Mitchell et al., 1989; White, 1994). In line with this hypothesis, two earlier studies have shown that young adults from stepfamilies are more likely to mention conflict as the reason for leaving home than young adults from other families (Kiernan, 1992; Young, 1987). Young adults from stepfamilies are more than twice as likely to leave home because of conflict as young adults from single-parent families (Kiernan, 1992). Bernhardt et al. (2005) showed that both conflict and having lived with a stepparent in the parental home increased the chance of early home-leaving in Sweden. While men from all types of stepfamilies were more likely to leave home early than men from two-parent families, women from stepfamilies were only more likely to leave early if there was conflict in the parental home. Based on these considerations, we hypothesize that young adults from stepfamilies are more likely to leave home early than young adults from single-parent families if the relationship with the stepparent is conflicted (Hypothesis 1).

A lack in closeness in the stepparent–child relationship could also explain differences in leaving home between young adults from stepfamilies and single-parent families. Young adults from stepfamilies less often regard their family as a source of support and distance themselves from their family (White, 1994). They have, on average, a less close relationship with their stepparents than with their parents (Amato, 1987; Golish & Caughlin, 2002; Kalmijn, 2013; King, 2006, 2009; Sweeney, 2010), and are more likely to avoid their stepparents (Golish & Caughlin, 2002; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Vuchinich, Hetherington, Vuchinich, & Clingempeel, 1991). Having close relationships in the parental home is seen as a nontransferable resource that delays home-leaving because it is lost when leaving home (Gierveld, Liefbroer, & Beekink, 1991). Indeed, several studies show that young adults leave home later if they have a close or supportive relationship with their parents (Gierveld et al., 1991; South & Lei, 2015). This might also apply to the stepparent–child relationship. Young adults might leave early because of a lack of support and closeness in the stepparent–child relationship. To our knowledge, no previous study has examined closeness in the stepparent–child relationship in relation to

leaving home. We expect that young adults from stepfamilies are more likely to leave home early than young adults from single-parent families if the relationship with the stepparent is distant (Hypothesis 2).

Young adults who are not close to their stepparent might look for intimacy and support outside of the parental home. Adolescents from stepfamilies start romantic relations at a younger age (Ivanova, Mills, & Veenstra, 2014), and have their first sexual intercourse at a younger age (Wu & Thomson, 2001). When they reach an age at which they can leave the parental home, the loss of intimacy in the parental home can make being at home less attractive. The young adult might leave home early followed by early union formation. Hence, especially young adults who do not have a close relationship with their stepparent might be likely to start living together with a partner soon after or upon leaving the parental home. We expect that the effect having a distant relationship with the stepparent is stronger for early home-leaving followed by early union formation than for early home-leaving followed by independence (Hypothesis 3). We do not expect such a difference in the effect of having a conflicted relationship with the stepparent on leaving home between the two pathways out of the parental home, as conflict with the stepparent makes that young adults would like to leave home regardless of the pathway.

It should be noted that the stepparent–child relationship is connected to other relationships in the family (King, Boyd, & Thorsen, 2015). Levels of conflict and closeness in the relationship between the child and the residential parent could both be affected by and be a cause of a lack of closeness or conflict in the stepparent–child relationship. King (2009) showed that the quality of the relationship with the mother declines when a stepfather enters the household. In turn, stepfather–child relationships are more likely to be close when the mother–child relationship was closer before the stepfather entered the household. The stepparent–child relationship quality might also be related to conflict between the resident parent and nonresident parent. Conflict and a lack of closeness in the parent–child and parent–parent relationships add to a more negative family climate and could create a desire among children to leave home and to look for intimacy in a partner relationship. As we use cross-sectional data, we are not able to determine

the causal order of the different relationships; they might simultaneously affect each other. However, we do explore the role of closeness and conflict in the biological parent–child relationship and conflict in the biological parent–parent relationship as additional indicators of stepfamily experiences.

METHODS

Data and Sample

We used data from the multi-actor OKiN survey, which was conducted in 2017 (Kalmijn et al., 2018). The OKiN data sampled adult children aged 25–46 (born 1971–1991) and their parent figures. The survey is concerned with topics such as intergenerational relations, intergenerational reproduction, health, and well-being. The survey contained questions about the relationship with all parent figures in the young adults' lives. We relied on the OKiN data for all our variables, with the exception of information on the age at union formation which was retrieved from the System of Social statistical Datasets (SSD) (Bakker, van Rooijen, & van Toor, 2014) from Statistics Netherlands. There were two main advantages to using the OKiN data for our study purposes. First of all, the number of young adults from stepfamilies in the data was high, as this group was oversampled based on data from the Dutch population registers. Second, as the data contained information on the relation to all parent figures in the child's life, we had information on levels of conflict and closeness to the stepparent and biological parents.

Our original sample consisted of 3,872 individuals aged 25–46 whose parents had separated in the child's youth, before age 18. We focused on children whose parents have separated, excluding children from two-parent or widowed families. Children from widowed families differ substantially from children from separated families and are more similar in their home-leaving behavior to children from two-parent families than to those from separated families (van den Berg et al., 2018b). Individuals were excluded if information was missing on whether parents had a new partner in youth ($n = 14$), the financial situation in youth ($n = 128$), or the age at leaving home ($n = 10$). Moreover, individuals were excluded who could not be matched to register data on cohabitation ($n = 165$). This led to a final sample size of 3,555 individuals. All of these young adults experienced parental

separation before age 18. The average age at parental separation was 6.8 and the range was 0 to 17. Most of the young adults lived with their mother for the longest period after parental separation (348 lived with the father).

Measures

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for our measures. Home-leaving patterns formed the dependent variable of interest. The age at leaving home was measured with the following question in the OKiN survey: “At what age did you live independently from your parents for the first time?” Living independently included home-leaving among university students. We matched the OKiN data with data from the SSD on the age at union formation. We determined the age at union formation as the age at which a young adult started living together in the same household with a partner for the first time. We defined three categories: later home-leaving, early home-leaving followed by independence, and early home-leaving coinciding with or followed by early union formation. Similar to previous studies (e.g., Raab, 2017), we used different cutoff ages for men and women because they differ strongly in the average age at which they experience most life course transitions. On average, women in our sample left the parental home 1 year earlier than men and formed unions 2 years earlier. These differences were similar to findings from other studies (Mitchell, 2006). By using different cutoff ages, we accounted for the possibility that a transition that would be considered early for men might not be early for women. Home-leaving was coded as early if it occurred by age 18 (women) or age 19 (men). Union formation was coded as early if it occurred by age 22 (women) or age 24 (men). As all individuals in the sample were older than 25 years, there were no censoring issues. In total, 64% of the young adults did not leave home early, 21% left early followed by independence, and 15% left early followed by early union formation. The distribution of the variable was comparable for men and women if these different cutoff ages were used.

The main independent variables were having a stepparent, conflict with the stepparent and having a distant relationship with the stepparent. The stepparent is the parent’s partner in youth. As respondents might have different views of who can be considered a stepparent

(Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Sanner, Ganong & Coleman, 2020), the survey did not explicitly use the term stepparent. Instead, the respondents were asked about the partners of their biological parents. In this way, differences in interpretation were minimized. In case the child has moved from one parent to the other in youth, we chose the partner of the parent with whom the child lived with for the longest period before age 18. We focused on the longest rather than the last resident parent because moving in with the other parent just before reaching adulthood could be a step in the home-leaving process as the result of stress in the parental home. The parental home in which the child resided the longest was expected to be the most influential for early life-course decisions. The measure was highly comparable to coding the family structure based on the last parent the child lived with. For 83% of the young adults, the stepparent they lived with for the longest period was also the last stepparent they lived with. A robustness check showed that there was no significant difference in the findings using the two different ways of coding.

Conflict with the stepparent was measured with the following question in the OKiN survey: “Were there sometimes tensions/conflict between you and your parent’s partner in youth?” For these questions, youth referred to the period in which the child was living in the same household as the stepparent. This period started when the stepparent entered the household and ended when the stepparent left the household, the child turned 18, or the child left home. The average number of years living in the same household as the stepparent in youth was 7.8 and the range was 0–18. Answer options “never” and “sometimes” were coded as low-conflict, while answers “regular” and “often” were coded as frequent conflict. About 22% of all young adults had a stepparent with whom they had frequent conflict (regularly or often). This was about 32% of the young adults who had a stepparent. Closeness was measured with the following question: “How close were you to parent’s partner in youth?” Answers “very close,” “close,” and “reasonably close” were coded as close, while answers “not close” and “not close at all” were coded as not close. About 22% of all young adults—32% of the young adults with a stepparent—were not close to the stepparent in youth. Conflict and closeness were coded as 0 for young adults without a stepparent.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics (N = 3,555)

Variables	Mean/%	SD	Min	Max	n	Description
Early home-leaving						Based on retrospective reports on the age at leaving home and register data on the age at union formation. Home-leaving was coded as early if experienced before age 18 (women) or 19 (men). Union formation was coded early if experienced before age 23 (women) or 25 (men)
Later home-leaving	0.64				2,269	
Early home-leaving and independence	0.21				742	
Early home-leaving and early union formation	0.15				544	
Stepparent	0.68		0	1	2,414	Coded as 0 if the child grew up in a single parent family, 1 if the resident parent of the child had a new partner
Conflict with stepparent	0.22		0	1	2,763	Conflict was measured with the question: "Were there sometimes tensions/conflict between you and your parent's partner in youth?" Never and sometimes were coded as low conflict, regular and often as frequent conflict.
Distant to stepparent	0.22		0	1	2,783	Closeness was measured with the question: "How close were you to parent's partner in youth?" <i>Very close</i> , <i>close</i> , and <i>reasonably close</i> were coded as close, <i>not close</i> and <i>not close at all</i> as distant.
Conflict resident parent	2.13	0.84	1	4	3,555	Measured with the question: "Were there sometimes tensions/conflict between you and your parent in youth?" Mean-centered.
Closeness resident parent	4.00	1.05	1	5	3,555	Measured with the question "How close were you to parent's partner in youth?" Mean-centered.
Postseparation parental conflict						Measured with the question: "Were there sometimes tensions/conflict between your biological parents in the years after the separation?" <i>Never</i> and <i>sometimes</i> were coded as low conflict, <i>regular</i> and <i>often</i> as high conflict, <i>missing</i> as don't know.
Low	0.47				1,652	
High	0.27				954	
Don't know	0.27				949	
Year of birth	1983.59	5.34	1971	1991	3,555	Mean-centered
Difficulties making ends meet in youth						Measured with the question: "How difficult was it for your parent (and your parent's partner) to make ends meet?" <i>Very difficult</i> and <i>difficult</i> were coded as difficult, <i>not easy but also not difficult</i> as neutral, <i>easy</i> and <i>very easy</i> as easy.
Difficult	0.24				861	
Neutral	0.29				1,032	
Easy	0.47				1,662	
Number of siblings	1.57	1.26	0	6	3,555	The total number of siblings with whom the child lived in the house of the resident parent, including half- and step-siblings. Truncated at 6.
Man	0.46		0	1	1,639	Coded as 0 if responden is a woman, 1 if the respondent is a man.

In addition, we looked at other indicators for stepfamily experiences. First of all, we examined the role of levels of closeness and conflict in the child's relationship with the resident biological parent. These variables were measured with questions similar to the questions on closeness to the stepparent and conflict with the stepparent. For these questions, youth referred to the period in which the child was 12–18 years old, or between 12 and leaving home if the child left before age 18. Both indicators were included as linear variables and centered. Second, we included postseparation conflict between the resident biological parent and nonresident biological parent. We coded this variable as low-conflict if there was never or sometimes conflict in youth, and high-conflict if there was regular or often conflict in youth. A third category consisted of young adults for whom this variable was missing or who did not know the level of parental postseparation conflict. Lastly, we looked at the financial situation in the parental home in youth and the number of siblings. These characteristics formed some of the most important alternative explanations for early home-leaving among young adults from separated families, as there might be overcrowding or few economic resources that make staying at home less attractive. The financial situation in youth was based on the following question: "How difficult was it for your parent (and your parent's partner) to make ends meet?" In case the child grew up with a stepparent, we used the financial situation in the parental home when living with the parent and the stepparent. In case the child grew up with a single parent, we used the financial situation in the parental home when living with the single parent. We grouped this measure into three categories: difficult, neutral, and easy. The number of siblings was an indicator for crowding in the parental home. It was based on the total number of siblings with whom the child lived, including half- and step-siblings. We did not count the children of the nonresident biological parent with a new partner. We truncated the number of siblings at six because there were a few outliers (39 cases), individuals who had lived with 6–15 siblings. A robustness check showed that this did not alter our findings. Gender and birth year were included as control variables in all analyses.

Analytical Strategy

We studied home-leaving patterns using multinomial logistic regression analyses. We

abstained from using event-history models because we were interested in the occurrence of experiencing both home-leaving and union formation early rather than the exact timing of leaving home and union formation. Moreover, right-censoring was not an issue because all individuals were at least 25 years old at the time of the survey. We used different cutoff ages for men and women but examined them together. In an additional analysis, we examined whether the effect of stepparent experiences on home-leaving patterns differed between men and women. First, we conducted a set of analyses in which we examined the effect of having a stepparent on home-leaving patterns. In these analyses, we only controlled for the year of birth and gender. In Model 2, we added the detailed measures for stepfamily experiences, measuring closeness and conflict in the stepparent–child relationship. This allowed us to differentiate between the main effect of having a stepparent and the effects of having a conflicted or distant relationship with the stepparent. We defined the following variables: step (0 = no stepparent, 1 = stepparent), conflict (0 = no stepparent or no conflict with a stepparent, 1 = conflict with a stepparent), and distant (0 = no stepparent or not distant to a stepparent, 1 = distant to a stepparent). The model is as follows:

$$Y = b_0 + b_1 \text{ step} + b_2 \text{ conflict} + b_3 \text{ distant} \\ + b_4 \text{ controls} + \epsilon$$

In our parametrization, b_1 represented the effect of having a stepparent for those who had a close and not conflicted relationship with the stepparent (what we call the "neutral" stepparent effect). In this case, conflict and distant are both zero, and hence, the step effect is only b_1 . The effects b_2 and b_3 represented the effects of frequent conflict (b_2) and having a distant relationship (b_3) with the stepparent on top of the neutral stepparent effect. To calculate the effect of a conflicted stepparent relationship vis-à-vis having no stepparent, one would need to add b_1 and b_2 . The effect of having a conflicted stepparent relationship vis-à-vis a not conflicted relationship is the effect of b_2 . The indicator b_4 represented the control variables, gender and birth year, which were included in all analyses.

In Model 3, we examined whether the effects of closeness and conflict interact. Finally, in Model 4, we added some other indicators for

stepfamily experiences, such as conflict with the resident parent and the financial situation in the parental home. To what extent do stepfamily experiences matter when these characteristics are taken into account?

RESULTS

Multinomial Logistic Regression Analyses

The results for the multinomial logistic regression analyses are presented in Table 2. The reference category consisted of later home leavers, that is, women who did not leave home by age 18 and men who did not leave home by age 19 (regardless of their partner status later).

First, we examined the main effect of growing up in a stepfamily on early home-leaving using our more detailed measure for home-leaving patterns, that is, differentiating between pathways out of the home. The results in Model 1 show that growing up in a stepfamily increased the chance of leaving home early followed by early union formation. Young adults from stepfamilies had 1.2 times the risk of leaving home and forming a union early compared to young adults from single-parent families. There were no significant differences between young adults from stepfamilies and single-parent families in the likelihood of leaving home early for independence. Hence, with our more detailed measure for home-leaving, we show that the effect of growing up in a stepfamily on early home-leaving depended on the pathway out of the parental home. Birth year and gender had no effect on early home-leaving. There were no differences between men and women in the likelihood to leave home early because gender-sensitive cut-off ages were used.

In Model 2, we added more detailed measures for stepfamily experiences. The goodness of fit analyses show mixed findings on whether these additional indicators for stepfamily experiences improved the prediction of early home-leaving. The higher value of the pseudo R^2 and lower value of the AIC (6,4929.092 in Model 1 compared to 6,420.464 in Model 2) indicated that the model fit was better in Model 2, which included our more detailed measure for stepfamily experiences. However, the BIC was lower in Model 1 than in Model 2 (37.090 in Model 1 compared to 37.166 in Model 2), indicating a better fit of Model 1. These contrasting findings can be explained by a loss in degrees of freedom with the use of a more detailed measure of

stepfamily experiences. The loss in degrees of freedom was more strongly penalized by the BIC than by the AIC.

We first discuss the results in Model 2 for the effects of stepfamily experiences on early home-leaving followed by independence. In line with Hypothesis 1, young adults who had frequent conflict with the stepparent were 1.8 times as likely to leave early followed by independence compared to young adults who had a stepparent with whom they had no conflict. There was no significant effect of having a distant relationship with the stepparent on early home-leaving followed by independence. With the variables measuring conflict with and being distant to the stepparent added to the model, the effect of growing up in a stepfamily on early home-leaving followed by independence was significant. Given our parameterization, this effect applied to stepparents with whom the child was close and with whom he or she had no conflict. As the effect is lower than 1, young adults with a stepparent were less likely to leave home early compared to young adults from single-parent families, assuming the relationship with the stepparent was close and without conflict.

We now zoom in on the pathway of early home-leaving followed by early union formation. In line with Hypothesis 2, our results show that young adults who were not close to the stepparent were significantly more likely to leave home early and form a union early compared to young adults from single-parent families. Young adults who had a distant relationship with their stepparent were 1.4 times as likely as to leave than young adults who did not have a distant relationship with their stepparent. There was no significant effect of having conflict with the stepparent on early home-leaving followed by early union formation. The effect of having a stepparent no longer reached conventional measures of significance in this model. This suggests that having a stepparent did not increase the chance of leaving early followed by early union formation if the relation with the stepparent was close and without conflict.

All in all, our findings show that both conflict and closeness in the relationship with the stepparent affected early home-leaving. Whereas conflict primarily mattered for early home-leaving followed by independence, closeness mattered more for early home-leaving followed by union formation. The latter finding is in line with Hypothesis 3.

Table 2. Multinomial Logistic Regression on Early Home-Leaving (Reference Category Is Later Home-Leaving; in Relative Risk Ratios [RRR]. N = 3,555)

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4									
	RRR	SE	RRR	SE	RRR	SE	RRR	SE								
Stepparent	0.95	0.09	1.24*	0.13	0.79*	0.08	1.11	0.13	0.76*	0.09	1.24	0.16				
Distant to stepparent					0.96	0.12	1.44**	0.20	1.00	0.19	1.53*	0.26	0.86	0.11	1.18	0.17
Conflict with stepparent					1.76***	0.22	0.93	0.13	1.82***	0.28	1.01	0.20	1.58***	0.20	0.85	0.12
Distant x conflict stepparent									0.92	0.23	0.86	0.24				
Year of birth	1.01	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.01	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.01	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.01	0.01	1.00	0.01
Man	1.17	0.10	0.93	0.09	1.18*	0.10	0.92	0.09	1.18*	0.10	0.92	0.09	1.23*	0.11	0.96	0.09
Conflict resident parent													1.26***	0.07	1.11	0.07
Closeness resident parent													0.88**	0.04	0.79***	0.04
Parental conflict (ref. low)																
High													1.11	0.12	1.46***	0.17
Don't know													0.90	0.10	0.98	0.12
Making ends meet (ref. difficult)																
Neutral													0.91	0.11	0.88	0.12
Easy													1.30*	0.16	0.95	0.13
Number of siblings													1.04	0.04	1.08*	0.04
Constant	0.31***	0.03	0.21***	0.02	0.31***	0.03	0.21***	0.02	0.31***	0.03	0.21***	0.02	0.29***	0.03	0.20***	0.03
Pseudo R ²		0.002		0.007		0.007		0.007		0.007		0.023				
AIC		6,429.092		6,420.464		6,420.464		6,360.136		6,360.136		6,371.181				
BIC		37,090		37,166		37,166		53,190		53,190		48,349				
Chi-square LR		11,966		44,595		44,595		44,923		44,923		147,877				
Chi-square deviance		6,393.092		6,360.464		6,360.464		6,444.136		6,444.136		6,257.181				

Source. OKIN, own calculations.

*p < .05. **p < .001. ***p < .0001.

In Model 3, we examined whether having a conflicted and distant relation with the stepparent interacted. Did conflict with the stepparent have a stronger effect on early home-leaving if the young adult had a distant relationship with the stepparent? The findings show that the interaction had no significant effect on either form of early home-leaving—the effects of having a distant and a conflicted relationship were simply additive.

Finally, in Model 4 we added several additional predictors to the model—the quality of the parent–child relationship, postseparation parental conflict, the financial situation in youth, and the number of siblings. We first discuss the results for early home-leaving followed by independence. Our findings show that the quality of the parent–child relationship affected the chance of leaving early followed by independence. Young adults who had a more conflicted and less close relationship with the resident parent in youth were more likely to leave home early followed by independence. Young adults whose families had no difficulties making ends meet were more likely to leave early than those who did face difficulties. Postseparation parental conflict and the number of siblings had no significant effects.

The findings in Model 4 show that the quality of the parent–child relationship affected the chance of early home-leaving followed by early union formation. Young adults who were close to the resident parent were less likely to leave home and form a union early. Postseparation parental conflict also predicted early home-leaving followed by early union formation. Young adults who experienced a high level of conflict between the biological parents were 1.5 times more likely to leave home early and form a union at an early age compared to young adults who experienced a low level of conflict. There is also some evidence for the effect of crowding, young adults who lived with more siblings in the parental home were more likely to leave early and form a union at an early age. Conflict with the resident parent and the financial situation in the parental home had no significant effects on early home-leaving followed by union formation.

Did adding these indicators affect the effects of our measures for stepfamily experiences on early home-leaving? In general, adding these indicators to the model weakened the effect of having frequent conflict or a distant relationship with the stepparent on early home-leaving.

However, even when accounted for other experiences in the parental home, young adults who had frequent conflict with the stepparent were more likely to leave home. Having a distant relationship with the stepparent had no longer a significant effect on early home-leaving followed by union formation when the additional indicators were added to the model. This suggests that having a distant relationship with the stepparent came together with a distant or conflicted relationship with the parent, which also affected early home-leaving and union formation.

Additional Analyses and Robustness Checks

We did several additional analyses. First, we ran analyses with some additional indicators of family relations. The findings for these analyses can be found in Table 3, Model 1. Frequent conflict with the nonresident parent had a significant positive effect on early home-leaving for independence. So, conflict with all three parent figures played a role in the decision to leave home early for independence. Conflict with the nonresident parent had no effect on early home-leaving followed by early union formation. The level of closeness with the nonresident parent did not affect the likelihood of early home-leaving. Age at parental separation had a negative effect; young adults who were older at the time of parental separation were less likely to leave home early. It had no effect on early home-leaving for independence.

Second, we looked at additional indicators of stepparent relations (in analyses restricted to young adults from stepfamilies). These analyses can be found in Models 2 and 3 of Table 3. These analyses show that young adults who lived with a stepparent later in life were less likely to leave home early followed by early union formation. Age at stepparent introduction had no effect on early home-leaving for independence. Young adults with a stepmother did not differ significantly from those with a stepfather in their early home-leaving behavior. Moreover, the effect of conflict with the stepparent did not differ between stepmothers and stepfathers. However, Model 3 shows that having a distant relationship with the stepparent had a stronger positive effect on early home-leaving followed by early union formation among young adults who had a stepmother than on those with a stepfather.

Table 3. Multinomial Logistic Regression on Early Home-Leaving (Reference Category Is Later Home-Leaving; in Relative Risk Ratios [RRR])

Variables	Single and stepfamilies			Only stepfamilies						
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			
	Early leaving and independence	Early leaving and early union	RRR	SE	RRR	SE	RRR	SE	RRR	SE
Stepparent	0.66***	0.08	1.12	0.16						
Conflict stepparent	1.52**	0.21	0.84	0.13	1.58***	0.20	0.82	0.12	1.49**	0.21
Distant stepparent	0.89	0.12	1.13	0.17	0.88	0.12	1.27	0.19	0.88	0.13
Year of birth	1.02*	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.02	0.01	1.00	0.01	1.02	0.01
Man	1.26*	0.12	1.01	0.11	1.36**	0.15	0.97	0.11	1.35**	0.15
Conflict resident parent	1.22**	0.08	1.09	0.08	1.24**	0.09	1.14	0.09	1.25**	0.09
Closeness resident parent	0.85**	0.04	0.78***	0.04	0.87*	0.05	0.84**	0.05	0.88*	0.05
Parental conflict (ref. low)										
High	1.08	0.12	1.40**	0.17	1.04	0.14	1.38*	0.19	1.04	0.14
Don't know	0.79	0.11	0.85	0.13	0.96	0.13	0.86	0.13	0.95	0.13
Making ends meet (ref. difficult)										
Neutral	0.94	0.12	0.97	0.14	0.85	0.16	0.74	0.14	0.85	0.16
Easy	1.32*	0.17	1.05	0.15	1.20	0.20	0.83	0.14	1.18	0.20
Number of siblings	1.04	0.04	1.09*	0.04	1.05	0.04	1.10*	0.05	1.05	0.04
Conflict nonresident parent	1.12*	0.06	1.12	0.07						
Closeness nonresident parent	0.95	0.04	1.01	0.05						
Age at parental separation	0.96***	0.01	0.98	0.01						
Age at introduction stepparent					0.98	0.01	0.96*	0.01	0.98	0.01
Stepmother (ref. stepfather)					1.25	0.21	1.00	0.19	1.02	0.24
Stepmother × conflict stepparent									1.51	0.56
Stepmother × distant stepparent									1.02	0.38
Constant	0.33***	0.04	0.20***	0.03	0.22***	0.04	0.29***	0.06	0.23***	0.04
N individuals				3,211				2,398		

Source. OKIN, own calculations.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$. *** $p < .0001$.

Third, we checked for differences between men and women in the effects of stepfamily experiences on early home-leaving. We interacted gender with all three indicators for the stepparent–child relationship—having a stepparent, conflict with the stepparent, having a distant relationship with the stepparent. This analysis showed that men experience a more positive effect of having a stepparent on early home-leaving for independence. Whereas women who had no conflict and a close relationship with the stepparent did not differ significantly from women from single-parent families, men who had no conflict and a close relationship with the stepparent were more likely to leave early for independence than men from single-parent families. The effects of the other indicators of stepfamily experiences did not differ between men and women.

We performed several robustness checks. First of all, we used different cutoff ages for early home-leaving and early union formation. The results for an analysis with the same cutoff age for men and women (leaving home by age 18, union formation by age 24) yielded similar results. Second, we used a different operationalization of closeness in which “reasonably close” was coded as not close rather than close. The findings for the analyses with this operationalization of closeness were similar to those presented in the paper. Finally, we did a robustness analysis among a sample restricted to the stepfamilies in which we examined the effect of linear measures of conflict and closeness in the stepparent–child relationship. In line with the findings presented in this paper, young adults with a more conflicted relationship with the stepparent were more likely to leave home early for independence. The linear measure for closeness with the stepparent had no significant effect on early home-leaving via either pathway.

DISCUSSION

Children who experienced parental separation are more likely to move out of the parental home at a young age (Aquilino, 1991; Blaauboer & Mulder, 2009; Cooney & Mortimer, 1999; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1989, 1998; van den Berg et al., 2018a). Zooming in on separated families, we provided more insight into the role of stepfamily experiences on leaving home. In line with some previous

studies, we demonstrated that young adults who grow up with a stepparent are more likely to leave home at a young age compared to young adults from single-parent families (Aquilino, 1991; Blaauboer & Mulder, 2009; Cooney & Mortimer, 1999; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1989, 1998; van den Berg et al., 2018a, 2018b). Using recently collected data from the Netherlands that included an oversample of young adults from separated families and stepfamilies, we used detailed measures for both dependent and independent variables. Specifically, we used measures for stepfamily experiences that captured closeness and conflict in the stepparent–child relationship, and a more detailed measure of home-leaving that captured whether home-leaving was followed by early union formation. It should be noted that although we use the terms stepfamily and stepparent, individuals might differ in their interpretation of whether someone is a stepparent (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Sanner, Ganong & Coleman, 2020).

The main finding of our research is that there is heterogeneity in the effect of growing up with a stepparent on leaving home. We provided evidence for theoretical work on stepfamilies which suggests that young adults who grow up in stepfamilies leave early because of the social environment in the parental home (Booth et al., 1984; Hill et al., 2001; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988; White, 1994). In line with Hypotheses 1 and 2, we show that conflict and a lack of closeness in the relationship with the stepparent were associated with early home-leaving. These findings support the findings from two earlier studies that suggested that young adults from stepfamilies were more likely to leave home because of conflict (Kierman, 1992; Young, 1987). Our findings put the role of stepparents as a stressor into perspective by showing that growing up with a stepparent only increased the chance of leaving home early if the child had a distant or conflicted relationship with their stepparent. Young adults who had no conflict and a close relationship with the stepparent were even less likely to leave home early for independence than those from single-parent families. About half of the young adults from stepfamilies had such a relationship with the stepparent.

Not only did we look at stepfamily experiences in more detail, but we also used a more detailed measure for early home-leaving. It is

relevant to study whether early home-leaving is followed by early union formation because unions that are formed in this relatively unstable early life-phase are more likely to dissolve (Lehrer, 2006; Oppenheimer, 1988). Early home-leaving followed by early union formation might, therefore, be a more “problematic” route out of the parental home. Our findings show that having a stepparent had the strongest effect on the chance of experiencing both home-leaving and union formation at a young age. In line with Hypothesis 3, this was especially the case for young adults who had a distant relationship with their stepparent. It might be that these young adults looked for intimacy outside of the parental home and started dating at a younger age (Ivanova et al., 2014). Conflict mattered more for early home-leaving followed by independence than for early home-leaving followed by early union formation. An avenue for future research is to examine the further life course of young adults from single-parent and stepfamilies. Do early home-leaving and early union formation indeed translate into a higher prevalence of union dissolution among young adults from stepfamilies?

Our findings also provided more insight in how other social relations in the parental home were related to early home-leaving. The relationship with the stepparent might affect and be affected by the relationship between the child and the resident parent and conflict between the biological parents. Young adults were more likely to leave home early if there was a lack of closeness or conflict in the relationship with the resident parent and if there was conflict between the biological parents. When these other indicators for stepfamily experiences were added to the model, most of the effects of the stepparent–child relationship were weakened but the effect of conflict with the stepparent stayed significant. These findings are important in light of the scarcity of research on the effect of social relations in the parental home on leaving home. We add to few previous studies that suggested that leaving home is not a purely economic rational choice but is also based on the quality of the relationship with the parents (e.g., Seiffge-Krenke, 2006; South & Lei, 2015). The finding that postseparation conflict between the parents increased the chance of early home-leaving is a new finding. This is important for a better understanding of the strong

differences in early home-leaving between young adults from separated and two-parent families (Aquilino, 1991; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1998).

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