 Journal of Family Studies (2010) **16**: 237–250.

Preparing to repartner and live in a stepfamily: An exploratory investigation

CLAIRE CARTWRIGHT, PHD, DIPCLINPSYCH*
Department of Psychology, University of Auckland, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

Little is known about the courtship period of stepfamily couples. This current study is an exploratory investigation of the preparation couples undertake prior to stepfamily living. Ninety-nine stepfamily adults living in New Zealand completed an online questionnaire about the courtship period. The results suggest that couples are motivated to repartner by needs for an intimate relationship and associated benefits, although economic and resource issues precipitated cohabitation for some. Many participants had awareness of potential stepfamily challenges. However, the majority did not talk to partners about parenting issues, or how to manage the change for children, supporting earlier findings that stepfamily couples avoid communicating about difficult issues. The results also suggest that many children received little preparation or communication about the decision to repartner and live in a stepfamily.

Keywords: stepfamily; stepparent; courtship; remarriage; stepparent–child

Many children spend part of their childhood in a stepfamily household. Approximately 9% of married couple households in the United States and 11.5% of cohabiting households contain resident stepchildren (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). In Australia, approximately one in ten couple families contain resident stepchildren (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2007) and 13% of households in the third wave of the HILDA survey have either residential or non-residential stepchildren, or both (Qu & Weston, 2005). Stepfamily data are not collected in the New Zealand census; however, results from the longitudinal Christchurch Health and Development Study indicated that 18.6% of the 1265 study participants had lived in a stepfamily (either cohabiting or remarried) between the ages of 6 and 16 years (Nicholson, Fergusson, & Horwood, 1999).

Stepfamilies face challenges that are unique and often struggle to form functional family households. Over the last three decades, researchers have focused on a number of areas relevant to stepfamily processes and relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). However, there are still several areas of stepfamily life that have received little research attention (Stewart, 2007). Given the evidence of

* Correspondence to: Dr Claire Cartwright, Department of Psychology, University of Auckland, New Zealand. Email: c.cartwright@auckland.ac.nz.

increased risks of negative outcomes for children in stepfamilies, compared to their peers from first marriages (Amato, 2000; Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), it is important to consider new areas that may lead to productive developments, especially in practices that can assist stepfamilies. This study focuses on one such area—the processes that couples engage in prior to living in a stepfamily household.

Stepfamily researchers have investigated stepfamilies post-remarriage and little is known about the preparation that couples engage in prior to cohabitation or remarriage (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Two exceptions to this include an early study in the USA that asked stepfamily couples about their preparation for remarriage (Ganong & Coleman, 1989) and a more recent British study that interviewed mothers (Smith, 2008) and stepfathers (Robertson, 2008) about stepfamily life with some focus on the period prior to repartnering. These studies suggest that many couples do little to prepare for living in a stepfamily. Many repartnered quickly and did not discuss parenting and stepparenting roles prior to repartnering (Ganong & Coleman, 1989; Robertson, 2008; Smith, 2008).

There is also evidence that some children receive little assistance with the transition (Robertson, 2008). While there has been some research into children's involvement in parental separation and custodial arrangements (e.g., Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2002; Smith, Gollop, Taylor, & Tapp, 2001), there has been no investigation of the ways in which parents communicate with children about the decision to repartner. Ganong and Coleman (1989) concluded that the main means of preparing for remarriage was cohabitation. However, this invites the question: What is the main means of preparing for cohabitation and living in a stepfamily?

The present exploratory investigation aims to provide insight into the preparation processes of a group of adults living in stepfamilies in New Zealand. It is part of a larger study – the Couples in Repartnered (Step) Families Study – which investigated a number of areas of stepfamily living, including the challenges and positive aspects of stepfamily life. It investigates people's reasons for repartnering, the length of courtship, concerns and hopes about repartnering prior to doing so, their perceptions of how realistic they were in retrospect, the issues they discussed and planned, how they made the decision to repartner, and how, if at all, they talked to the children about their decision to repartner.

Who remarries and why?

While little is known about how people decide to repartner and prepare for doing so, a number of demographic and economic studies have examined the determinants of forming a second union (cohabiting or remarried) after the dissolution of a previous union (De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003). De Graff and Kalmijn concluded that the most consistent findings across studies are in regard to age and gender. The likelihood of repartnering diminishes with age (De Graff & Kalmijn, 2003; Hughes, 2000), and men are more likely to repartner and to repartner more quickly than women (De Graff & Kalmijn, 2003; Hetherington, 2003; Wu and Schimelle, 2005). Women with children are also less like to repartner compared to both women without children and men (Stewart, Manning, & Smock, 2003). However, the impact of resident and non-resident children on fathers' likelihood of repartnering is less clear (De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003). A recent study in the USA found that fathers with non-residential children who visit are more likely than other men to repartner although fathers with resident children are not more likely to form a union (Stewart et al., 2003). Findings regarding the impact of other social and demographic variables such as education, employment, and occupational status are less consistent and these inconsistencies may be accounted for, at least in part, by the multiple and potentially competing factors that impact on repartnering (De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003). For example, having a paid job (as opposed to having no paid job) may reduce the odds of repartnering

through financial need, but may raise the odds through increased dating opportunities (De Wilde & Uuuk, 2008).

There are a number of arguments in the literature to account for first marriages and cohabiting unions, and these can also be applied to repartnering and remarriage (De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003; Poortman, 2007). There is research evidence to support a needs hypothesis of repartnering, which proposes that people repartner for the benefits of an intimate relationship (De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003). In fact, the development of an intimate relationship, either dating or cohabiting, does facilitate the development of post-divorce adjustment (Amato, 2000). Divorced individuals in relationships show less attachment to their former spouses, have a more positive outlook on life (Amato, 2000), and experience a reduction of distress and an enhanced sense of wellbeing (Hetherington, 2003; Johnson & Wu, 2002).

Some researchers have also examined the impact of economic need, particularly in regard to mothers who experience, on average, a greater loss of income through divorce compared to fathers (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; De Wilde & Uuuk, 2008; Hughes, 2000). Remarried and cohabiting couple households have higher levels of economic resources than single parent households (De Wilde & Uuuk, 2008; Hughes, 2000). However, research does not consistently support an economic needs hypothesis. For example, two studies, one in Australia (Hughes, 2000) and one in the Netherlands (De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003), found that women on social welfare with lower levels of resources, and arguably greater levels of economic need, were less likely to repartner.

Though researchers have defined some of the variables that influence the likelihood of repartnering, little is known about the ways that individuals prepare and plan for repartnering. Stepfamily couples are faced with greater complexity and uncertainty than first marriage couples. Unlike first marriages or first de facto relationships, they have to include considerations about children and issues related to stepfamily living. The present study goes some way towards understanding how parents and potential stepparents manage these complexities.

Preparation for stepfamily living

Despite the complexity of the decision, there is evidence that divorced adults who repartner do so quickly (Hetherington, 2003). There is also some recent evidence that children may receive little preparation for the family transition and for living in a stepfamily household. In the UK New Stepfamilies Study (Robertson, 2008; Smith, 2008), four fifths of couples began cohabiting within a year of beginning a relationship. A third of stepfathers did not spend time with stepchildren during the courtship period. Mothers reported that a third of the stepfathers did not know the stepchild well and 8% did not know the stepchild at all prior to cohabitation. Only a quarter of stepfathers (Robertson, 2008) and a third of mothers (Smith, 2008) reported discussing issues to do with parenting and stepparenting roles prior to repartnering.

Ganong and Coleman (1989, 2004) proposed a number of explanations to account for the lack of purposeful planning they found with stepfamily couples. These include the use of an avoidant strategy to cope with potential uncertainty. This is supported by evidence that stepfamily couples avoid sensitive topics more than first-marriage couples (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003) and are more likely to withdraw from discussion of difficult issues (Halford, Nicholson, & Sanders, 2007). The second and third explanations centre on the impact of unrealistically positive expectations that result in a lack of understanding of the need for preparation and planning; and culturally transmitted "myths" that influence peoples' perceptions of repartnering. These include the myth of "instant love" (Visher & Visher, 1988) and the belief that what is best for the adult will also be best for the children (Ganong and Coleman, 1989, 2004), The fourth explanation concerns the lack of resources available to people who are planning to repartner (Ganong & Coleman, 1989, 2004).

While a small number of studies have examined parental communication with children about divorce (e.g., Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2002) and custody arrangements (Smith et al., 2001), no studies have directly examined how parents communicate, if at all, with children about repartnering. Two qualitative studies conducted in New Zealand asked young adults and children about their experiences of stepfamily living (Cartwright, 2005; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). Some of the participants recalled feeling hurt or resentful when they were not consulted or informed about their parents' repartnering. Some reported that they received no communication about it and were simply informed that it was happening or had happened. As one young woman said of her custodial mother: "When my Mum got married, I didn't know that she was going to, that she was engaged. Like somebody else told me and I just couldn't believe it. Just because it happened when I was 9 years old!" (Cartwright, 2005, p. 275). Hence, it is possible that a lack of planning and preparation extends to a lack of communication with children. This is somewhat surprising, since divorced people may be expected to be more risk-conscious in regard to intimate relationships (Lewis, 2006) and concerned to protect their children from further family disruption.

The present study

Given the challenges that repartnering couples face as they enter stepfamily life, including the need to develop an adaptive stepparent role and a parenting alliance, a lack of preparation and planning is potentially problematic. Few studies, with the exception of those discussed, have asked adults in stepfamilies about their experiences of the courtship period. The present study uses descriptive methods to investigate this period of the couple's relationship. Descriptive studies that use both qualitative and descriptive quantitative data form an essential research approach available to researchers investigating new areas (Merriam, 2002; Sandelowski, 2000) and can be used to define areas for future research and theoretical development.

Both cohabiting and remarried stepfamily adults have been included in this study. While cohabitation may have been seen as preparation for remarriage in the 1980s (Ganong & Coleman, 1989), it is now an accepted and common form of living arrangement for many stepfamilies. In Australia, couples in both step (56%) and blended families (39%) (stepfamilies with a child/ren born to the new relationship) were more likely to be in a de facto marriage compared to those in intact families (8%) (ABS 2003). Similar to Australia, a growing proportion of New Zealanders cohabit. In 1996, about one in four men and women aged 15 to 44 years who were in partnerships were not legally married. In 2006, two in five men and women aged between 15 and 44 are in de facto relationships (Statistics New Zealand, 2007).

Method

Participants

Participants came from a range of different stepfamily types and reflect the diversity and complexity of stepfamilies. These included simple and complex stepmother and stepfather families, some with mutual children, and with a mix of residential and non-residential children. Ninety-nine adults completed the questionnaire. This included 68 women and 31 men. Sixty-nine participants were parents. Twenty-five of these were parents only, and 44 were both parents and stepparents. Thirty participants were stepparents only.

Twenty percent of participants had repartnered within the previous 12 months; 23% had been with their partner for one to three years; 29% for three to five years; and 30% for six years or more. Participants were in the 25 to 59 years old age range: 13% were younger than 34; almost a third (32.3%) were between 35 to 39 years; 45% were between 40 and 49; and 9% were between 50 to

59 years. This reflects the overall age trends for repartnering adults in NZ with 43 being the median age for remarriage for men and 39.4 for women (Statistics NZ, 2009).

Nineteen percent of the participants came from culturally mixed stepfamilies containing European, Maori, and/or Pacific Island parents, partners or children; 69% of participants lived in stepfamilies in which all members were of European descent; and the cultural backgrounds of the remaining 12% are unknown. These percentages appear to broadly reflect the population of New Zealand. Approximately 15% of New Zealanders identified themselves as Maori in the 2001 census; 7% as Pacific Islanders; and 79% as European (Statistics New Zealand, 2004).

Sixty-four percent of the participants had children resident in the home 12 to 14 days per fortnight; 23% had children resident in the home 7 to 11 days a fortnight; 9 % had children resident 4 to 6 days per fortnight; and the remaining 4% of households had previously resident children who had recently left home, or children there 2 days a fortnight.

The number of children from each participant household ranged from 1 to 9 with an average of 2.9 children per household. Twenty-five percent of the participants reported at least one mutual child born to the new relationship. Thirty percent of the stepparents only group had a mutual child to the new partner; 36% of the parents whose partners had no biological children had a mutual child; and 16% of participants who were both parents and stepparents had a mutual child in the family, suggesting a stronger trend towards having a mutual child when one of the adults has no biological children.

Recruitment

The study was advertised through a number of different methods. The majority of participants responded to a newspaper article published in several community newspapers. It was advertised on websites accessed by health and mental health workers, on one website accessed by men's groups, on a TV channel, and on a radio website. It was also advertised among separated adults who had attended a voluntary program 2 years earlier that focused on parenting issues post-separation.

Procedure

The questionnaire was designed to encourage participants to talk openly and non-defensively about their experiences. Following ethics approval from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, it was placed online using a survey website. A participant information sheet and a secure link to the online website were provided to participants who expressed interest in the study and met the study criteria of having a stepchild under the age of 18 years living in the household. The questionnaire contained a series of multiple-choice and open-ended questions. It could be completed in 30 minutes, although some participants reported taking up to an hour.

Data analysis

The questionnaire contained a mix of multiple-choice questions that resulted in quantitative data and open-ended questions that resulted in qualitative data. The results of the multiple-choice questions are presented using descriptive statistics. Categorical analyses of the qualitative data were conducted for each question using the methods described by Bowling (1997). The data for each question were examined and each of the participants' individual responses was coded. The codes were then examined and grouped into categories of related data. For example, under the question regarding hopes, all responses about positive aspects of the couple's relationship (such as "loving relationship", "support and caring", "long-term commitment") were grouped within a category titled "couple's relationship". These proposed categories were then examined to ensure that they represented the data validly. Another researcher reviewed all of the analyses and any disagreements about categories were resolved before the final categories were established. The results of the analyses are presented with quotes given as illustration.

Results

The results section presents an analysis of the responses to the questions relating to the present study, namely, the first section of the questionnaire that focused on the period prior to cohabitation. Since some participants did not answer all questions, the number responding to each question is given. The percentages are rounded off to the nearest number.

How long did you "date" your partner before moving in together or remarrying?

As can be seen from Table 1, 34% of participants (*N*=99) had repartnered within 6 months of dating, and 60% within a year. A smaller group (9%) dated for 2 to 4 years.

Reasons for repartnering

Participants were given five possible responses and a space for comments. They were asked to choose up to two main reasons for repartnering (*N*=99). As can be seen in Table 2, 89% reported being "in love" and half of the group emotional support. Practical support and the wellbeing of the children were chosen by less than a fifth of the group, and financial support by 6% of participants. (Please note that the percentages do not add up to 100% as people had the option of choosing two responses). Under "other" responses, 3 participants reported pregnancy as the reason for repartnering; 2 stated that they wanted to have a family; and 6 wrote about positive aspects of the couple's relationship, including emotional support, fun, and shared interests.

Table 1: Period of dating

Dating period	%
0 – 3 months	8
3 – 6 months	26
6 – 12 months	28
1 – 2 years	29
2 – 4 years	9

Table 2: Reasons for repartnering

Reasons	%
In love with new partner	89
Emotional support	50
Well-being of children	19
Practical support	18
Financial support	6

Concerns prior to repartnering

Participants were asked to list the concerns they had about living in a stepfamily prior to doing so. Four broad categories emerged from the 273 responses that were listed by the participants (see Table 3). In the first category of stepfamily relationships, 52 responses were concerns about being a stepparent; 43 were concerns about children's wellbeing and child management issues; 31 were parents' concerns about the stepparent–child relationship; 12 were about stepsibling relationships; and 8 were about the overall stepfamily well-being.

Stepparents stated concerns about acceptance by stepchildren and their own ability to fulfill the role. Examples included: "I wasn't sure how I would be accepted by another person's child", and "I had never had children, so am I basically a little selfish?" Parents were concerned about their partners' roles in regard to the children, for example: "What role my new partner would play in taking care of my children", and "Scared of my children not liking him and making it hard".

Twenty-one participants expressed concerns in a category about finances and the support of the stepfamily. As one mother in a complex stepfamily said, "We were financially tight—him supporting his family and me losing government subsidy as single parent". Seventeen participants expressed

Table 3: Concerns prior to repartnering

Concerns	%
Stepfamily relationships	56
Practicalities	16
The couple's relationship	15
The ex-spouse	13

concerns in a category termed logistics. These were particularly relevant to complex stepfamilies that had more children in the home, for example: "How I would manage in terms of time, space, workload, the kids".

Thirty-one participants expressed concerns about the impact of ongoing conflict between separated spouses, difficulties with custody arrangements, and other issues involving the children. Finally, 36 of the concerns expressed focused on the impact of stepfamily living on the couples' relationship or expressed fear about the relationship failing.

Hopes prior to repartnering

Participants were asked to write about their hopes for repartnering (*N*=98). Four main categories emerged from the responses (see Table 4). Some participants had responses in more than one category. The most common category concerned the participants' hopes for the couple's relationship. Inherent in many of these responses were past failed relationships and a desire for something better. These included hopes for loving relationships that lasted: "Someone to love and be loved by", and "A meaningful enduring relationship". Responses regarding the couple's relationship also included comments about potential benefits. As one person said, "Emotional support, companionship and sharing financial resources".

A third of the responses related to the desire to create a successful family situation, for example, "Living as 'one big happy family'" and "Creating a stable environment for our kids"; and, "Creating and sharing a new family and future together". Twenty-five percent of responses were expressions of hope that the new family situation would be good for the children. As one parent said, "That we could offer each other assistance with child-rearing. That our children would be happy and find it a positive experience for them". Twelve parents also wrote about their hope that the children would benefit from a role model, either through the stepparent, a stepsibling or by observing a functioning stepfamily. Comments included: "To demonstrate a loving couple/family for my kids", and "That my son would have a great role model". Hence, many participants did not choose to repartner because of the children but hoped that children would benefit from the new family situation.

Table 4: Hopes for repartnering

Hopes	%
Benefits of couple's relationship	61
Having a family	34
Good for the children	25
A role-model for the children	12

Making the decision to move in together or remarry

Participants were asked how they made the decision to move in together or to remarry. They were provided with a space in which to give their responses (*N*=98). There were four main categories of response (see Table 5). Some participants had responses in more than one category. Approximately 40% described some process of planning or discussion, for example, "We discussed it at great length over many months. We decided to find a place that offered a lot of defined areas of space to help make it work for the different ages and stages". Thirty-two percent wrote comments that suggested that their decisions were motivated by either practical or resource issues. These included statements about the difficulty seeing each other due to geographical distance, the cost of maintaining two houses, and difficulties with flatting situations, for example, "Probably three months (before moving in together). Both of our situations supported moving in together and sharing resources".

Twenty-five percent indicated that they made a spontaneous decision or that they never decided,

Table 5: Making the decision to repartner

Making the decision	%
Planning and discussion	41
Practical and resource issues	32
Spontaneous or evolved	25
Wanting to be together	15

rather it simply happened. As one participant said, "Didn't so much decide as it just happened! No real decision about it at all". Fifteen percent indicated that they wanted or needed to be together, "When we couldn't stay apart from each other and it was difficult leaving each time". Hence, participants varied in the time that they took to make the decision, and the degree of care or caution attached to the decision.

Issues that the couple talked about and planned

Participants were asked what other issues they talked about and planned. Fewer participants answered this question compared to the other questions (*N*=85). There were 230 responses to this question. Four main categories emerged (see Table 6). The largest category was a broad category that included any issues to do with the children (38%): 28 of these responses were around setting rules, or discipline of children, for example, "The rules of the house and discipline". Others were around relationships in the stepfamily, for example:

> Ensuring we had plenty of one on one times between my daughter and me. My partner planned times to be out so my daughter would be more likely to talk and be spontaneous.

A small number talked about the stepparent role: "How he would not be their father but was an adult in our home and should be respected as such". Some of the responses were also about custody arrangements, children's visits or relationships with the ex-spouse: "That we would need to tell the children's mother straight after telling the children so that they did not end up in a situation of having to do it themselves".

Forty-seven responses (21%) dealt with practical issues. These included where to live, how to manage space, children's bedrooms, and combining two households; and for one stepfamily, "How to integrate her two cats with our three cats!" Forty-three responses (19%) concerned the arrangements or decisions to do with finances. Comments included: "Opening a shared bank account for splitting bills, whilst retaining separate personal accounts", and "How we would manage the move financially?".

Twenty responses (9%) were concerns about relationships between ex-partners, for example: "How would the acrimonious relationship between the father/mother affect our lives/child?". Fifteen (7%) said they discussed having children of their own together, "That if our relationship continued to be successful we would both like to have other children together", and only 13 (6%) reported talking about the couples relationship, for example: "That we would nourish our relationship and that it would not fail".

Table 6: Issues that were talked about or planned

Issues discussed	%
The children	38
Practicalities	21
Finances	19
The ex-spouse(s)	9
Having a child together	7
Couple's relationship	6

Levels of confidence in decision to repartner

Participants were asked to rate how confident they were about repartnering and stepfamily living prior to doing so (*N*=97): 14% said they were *very confident*; 34% said *quite a lot*; 28% said *some*; 16% said *a little*; and 8% said *not at all*. These results suggest a relatively low level of confidence across the group of participants prior to repartnering, although around approximately one in seven were very confident (see Table 7).

Table 7: Levels of confidence prior to repartnering

Level of confidence	%
Very confident	14
Quite a lot	34
Some	28
A little	16
Not at all	8

Managing the change for the children

Participants were asked to select a statement regarding the degree of planning for managing the change for the children and were given 3 choices (*N*=98) (See Table 8). Forty percent said they talked a lot about how they would manage the change for the children; 36% said that they talked a bit about it; 25% said that they did not talk much about it as they thought it would all go well.

Talking to children about repartnering

Participants were asked to select a statement for how they talked to the children about moving in together or remarrying (*N*=99). They were given 5 choices: 17% indicated that they discussed it with the children and asked for the children's approval or support; 24% said they tried to give the children some say in the matter; 32% said that they talked to the children about it and then went ahead and did so; 26 % said that they told the children they were doing so(see Table 9).

Participants were then asked if they could recall what they actually said to the children and were provided with a space to write the response. Parents' and stepparents' reports were examined separately. The parents' responses fell into four categories. Thirty-seven percent of parents either said *No*, *not really* or gave *no response* to this question and 4.5% said the children were very young. Thirty-three percent told the children that they were moving in together or marrying and 13% told the children and then discussed their concerns or reassured them. As one mother said:

> I talked to my children and my husband talked to his separately. I told my daughter that I would like us to move in together and I hoped she could be happy about it, and we together talked of what worried her and what could be good about it.

Another 13% asked for children's opinions or approval. By way of example:

> I asked them whether they liked being with my partner and his child. Whether they might like to live at his house? My eldest said yes. Then we told them we were going to get married so we were all moving in together.

Initially, it seemed that the wording of this question may have been problematic, given that 37% of parents said *No* or did not answer it. However, it transpired that these participants were over-represented in the group of parents with the shortest courtship period: 62% of the participants who dated less than 6 months did not answer the question, compared to 11% of participants who dated for 6 to 12 months, and 28% of those who dated 12 months or more, suggesting that the length of the courtship might influence communication with children.

Some of the participants who dated for longer periods said that their children were familiar with the stepparent and stepsiblings, and indicated that the decision had "evolved" or developed slowly over time. As one parent said:

> We told them that we were going to get married so when we told them we were going to move in together it wasn't unexpected. The children already knew each other well at this stage and they were excited about becoming step siblings. Their being in the same age group made the transition very easy.

Table 8: Talking about the change for the children

Managing change for children	%
Talked a lot about it	40
Talked a bit about it	36
Did not talk about it as thought it would go well	24

Table 9: Talking to the children

Reasons for repartnering	%
Talked to the children then went ahead and did so	32
Tried to give children some say	24
Told the children they were	26
Asked for children's support or approval	17

The reports of the 30 stepparents with no biological children were then examined. Only 7 reported involvement in talking to the children or being present when this happened. Three described what the parent had said to the children, and 3 asked for the children's views or permission. As one stepfather said:

> I asked my partner's daughter if it would be alright if I moved in with her and mum. I also asked my youngest boy if he thought that it was ok to move in with my new partner.

How realistic were you?

Participants were asked how realistic their expectations of repartnering were in retrospect *(N*=98): 20% rated themselves as *very realistic*; 38% said they were *realistic*; 24% said they were *somewhat realistic*; 18% said they were *a little or not at all realistic*. Hence, 42% of participants saw themselves as having been less than realistic at the time of repartnering.

Talking about child care roles

This question was completed by parents only *(N*=66). It was a multiple-choice question: 40% of parents indicated that they had talked with partners before repartnering about "who would do what with the children"; 46% said that they talked about childcare issues as they arose, and worked it out; 9% said they never talked about it and it fell into place; and 3% said they argued all the time and could not agree.

Discussion

This study investigated the preparation processes of repartnering adults, an area that has been relatively neglected (Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

Table 10: Levels of being realistic

Levels of being realistic	%
Very realistic	20
Realistic	38
Somewhat realistic	24
A little or not at all	18

The process of forming a new partnership is arguably more complex and unpredictable when children from previous unions are involved. Adults who repartner form stepfamilies, which function differently from first marriage families, and are challenging for many (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Clinicians have noted the importance of a slow transition that gives children time to get to know potential stepparents and stepsiblings (e.g., Rodwell, 2002; Visher & Visher, 1988). However, as found previously (Hetherington, 2003; Robertson, 2008), many participants in this study had short courtships, two thirds repartnering within a year.

The desire or need for a couple's relationship emerged as the most common reason for repartnering. When asked about their hopes, the majority wrote about positive aspects of a couple's relationship. Only one in five reported repartnering for the wellbeing of children, although they hoped it would benefit the children, and only six participants named financial support. This finding supports a needs hypothesis of repartnering (e.g. De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003; Poortman, 2007) although the needs are mainly associated with the intimate relationship. This could reflect a cultural bias against being seen to marry for financial reasons (Weaver & Coleman, 2005; Schmeige, Richards, & Zvonkovic, 2001). On the other hand, repartnering for love and emotional support can be seen as somewhat realistic, given that forming a satisfying intimate partnership is associated with enhanced wellbeing for both single and divorced adults (Amato, 2000; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) though the benefits are somewhat diminished when resident children are present (Johnson & Wu, 2002).

The participants' concerns prior to repartnering centered mainly on potential problems in stepfamily relationships, especially the stepparent-child relationship, and the impact on children and the couples' relationship. Many stepparents expressed doubt about their ability to fulfill the role and to be accepted by stepchildren. Participants also expressed concerns about housing and

other practical issues, financial matters, and the potential cost of unresolved issues between exspouses. It is interesting to note that they did not appear to perceive the couple's relationship as a primary source of risk or concern but rather saw the couple's relationship and children's wellbeing at risk from potential stepfamily problems. As will be discussed later, the concerns seem somewhat realistic and reflect the challenges that researchers and clinicians have defined as characteristic of stepfamily living (e.g. Bray, 1999; Hethington & Kelly, 2002; Papernow, 2006).

The study also aimed to examine the argument that repartnering couples have unrealistic expectations (e.g., Visher & Visher, 1988), which in turn account for a lack of preparation and planning (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). As a group, the participants appeared to have some insight into the challenges ahead and this was accompanied by low to moderate levels of confidence. This suggests that they had at least somewhat realistic expectations about repartnering. On the other hand, two fifths of the group reported that they did not have realistic expectations. It may be that people understand some of the potential difficulties but underestimate the level of challenge associated with these.

Similar to results from the British study (Robertson, 2008; Smith, 2008), only two fifths of parents talked about the care of children with partners prior to repartnering despite the concerns about children. A third talked "a lot" about how to manage the change for the children, and 40% described some process of planning when asked how they made the decision to repartner. Taken together, these results suggest that stepcouples are aware of some of the potential difficulties inherent in stepfamily living but the majority do not talk about them prior to cohabitation. Nor do they prepare children for the changes. As discussed previously, there is evidence that stepfamily couples avoid sensitive topics more than first-marriage couples (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003) and are more likely to withdraw from discussion of difficult issues (Halford et al., 2007). Therefore, the lack of communication about parenting and stepparenting roles prior to cohabitation may reflect a desire to avoid potentially conflicted topics. It may also reflect a lack of real knowledge and understanding about the ways that stepfamilies function and the importance of preparing for parenting and stepparenting roles. Finally, parents may underestimate the difficulty that many children experience in adapting to a new parental partner and stepfamily living (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002).

An important finding concerns the precipitants of cohabitation. When asked about the decision to repartner, around a third of the group talked about resource and economic issues. These included the financial cost of maintaining two separate residences, the difficulties of geographical distance, and the benefits of sharing resources. Though an intimate relationship and its perceived benefits emerge as the primary reason for repartnering, economic and resource issues appeared to precipitate cohabitation for at least a third of participants. This is not surprising given the economic and resource issues that many separated adults experience (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Hughes, 2000).

Finally, previous studies have indicated that many children report receiving no explanation for their parents' separation (Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2002) and a lack of consultation about custodial arrangements (Smith et al., 2001). No studies have directly examined parents' communication with children about repartnering although there is indirect evidence that some stepchildren experience a lack of information and consultation (Cartwright, 2005; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). This current study found that many children also experience a lack of parental communication in regarding to repartnering. A quarter of the parents reported consulting children or talking over concerns and worries, and a third simply told children that they were moving in together or marrying. Three fifths of the parents who repartnered within 6 months of dating did not answer this question suggesting that short

courtships may be associated with a greater lack of communication with children. Further research is needed in this area.

Taken together, these results suggest that many repartnering individuals may have awareness of some of the challenges of stepfamily living. However, the difficulties associated with single life or single parenthood, and the desire for a close, supportive, and loving relationship appeared to override the uncertainties and concerns for the significant proportion who repartnered quickly. Perhaps as a result of being "in love", a concern to protect the new relationship, or an underestimate of the challenges ahead, many couples did not discuss or prepare for stepfamily issues during this period. While the need for an intimate relationship was experienced as the primary reason to repartner, economic and resource issues precipitated shorter courtships for some couples. Hence, many stepcouples made the decision to repartner without sufficient information, especially in regard to steprelationships. As a result of the above, some children received little preparation for living in a stepfamily.

In terms of a stepfamily systems perspective, these results suggest that many couples do not actively discuss the roles they will have, as parents and stepparents, in the new stepfamily household. The majority of parents reported that they began to deal with these issues as they arose as part of stepfamily life. Couples who do not discuss and work through these issues ahead of time enter stepfamily life with no sense of a parenting alliance and a lack of agreement about parenting and stepparenting roles. This may contribute, in part, to the problems that couples often experience with children in the first 2 to 4 years (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Limitations of the study

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study and to discuss future research directions. The participants were self-selected and, thus, the sample cannot be regarded as representative of stepfamilies in New Zealand. Secondly, this is a descriptive study and provides some insight into the preparation and planning of New Zealand stepfamily couples. However, it does not allow for conclusions to be drawn about the outcomes associated with different preparation processes. It is possible, for example, that some couples who repartnered quickly with little discussion had successful stepfamily experiences. Thirdly, the questionnaire responses tended to be brief and lacked the depth of information that may have been gained through interviews. Fourthly, participants reported retrospectively on their experiences and the experiences of stepfamily living may have influenced their responses. Finally, the participants came from a wide range of backgrounds and given the qualitative data, it is not possible to draw conclusions about the impact of gender, different family structures, and family histories.

Conclusion

Despite limitations, this study does provide a strong argument for future research into the early stages of stepfamily development, including the courtship period. It is important that future research focuses on examining this period and the ways that parents and potential stepparents think about parent and stepparent roles and the formation of a parenting alliance. It is also important to understand children's experiences of the courtship period, the ways in which parents prepare children for the transition, and the processes that are associated with positive outcomes in the early stages of stepfamily living. It is also desirable to gain insight into the precipitants of early cohabitation in order to know how to target education and support available to single parents who are considering repartnering.

There are a number of theoretical perspectives that guide stepfamily research. The present descriptive study has implications for the stepfamily systems perspective (Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) that investigates the ways in which stepfamily systems function. One of the major challenges facing stepfamily couples is the development of a parenting alliance between the parent and stepparent (Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright & Seymour, in press). This involves the development of parenting and stepparenting roles. By examining

the preparation period prior to repartnering, we have gained insight into the early stages of the couple's relationship and the couple's preparation for the roles they will adopt in relation to the children.

Acknowledgements:

This study contributed to the Family in Transitions (FIT) Study in New Zealand. The author would like to thank the Tindall Foundation for its grant to the FIT Study, and also the University of Auckland Research Committee Grant that made this current study possible. The author would also like to thank the participants for giving their time to the study.

References

Afifi, T. D., & Schrodt, P. (2003). Uncertainty and the avoidance of the state of one's family in stepfamilies, postdivorce, and single-parent families, and first-marriage families. *Human Communication Research, 29*, 516-532.

Amato, P. (2000). The consequences of divorce for adults and children. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 62*, 1269-1287.

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2003). *Family Characteristics, Australia.* (No. 4442.0). Canberra, ACT.

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2007) *2006 Census of population and housing* (cat. No. 2008.0). Canberra, ACT.

Bowling, A. (1997). Research methods in health: Investigating health and health services. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.

Bray, J. H. (1999). From marriage to remarriage and beyond: Findings from the Developmental Issues in Stepfamilies Research project. In E. M. Hetherington (Ed.), *Coping with divorce, single parenting, and remarriage. A risk and resiliency perspective.* (pp. 253-273). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Cartwright, C., & Seymour, F. (2002). Young adults' perceptions of parents' responses in stepfamilies. What hurts? What helps? *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage, 37*, 123-141.

Cartwright, C. (2005). Stepfamily living and parent–child relationships: An exploratory investigation. *Journal of Family Studies, 11*(2), 249-266.

Coleman, M., Ganong, L., & Fine, M. (2000). Investigating remarriage: Another decade of progress. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 62,* 1288-1307.

De Graaf, P. M., & Kalmijn, M. (2003). Alternative routes in the remarriage market: Competing-risk analyses of union formation after divorce. *Social Forces, 81*, 1459-1498.

De Wilde, C., & Uuuk, W. (2008). Remarriage as a way to overcome the financial consequences of divorce: A test of the economic need hypothesis for European women. *European Sociological Review, 24*, 393-407.

Dunn, J., & Deater-Deckard, K. (2002). *Children's views of their changing families*. York, UK: Joseph Rowntree.

Ganong, L., & Coleman, M. (1989). Preparing for remarriage: Anticipating the issues, seeking solutions. *Family Relations, 38*, 28-33.

Ganong, L., & Coleman, M. (2004). *Stepfamily relationships: Development, dynamics and interventions*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.

Halford, K., Nicholson, J., & Sanders, M. (2007). Couple communication in stepfamilies. *Family Process, 46*, 471-483.

Hetherington, E. M. (2003). Intimate pathways: Changing patterns in close personal relationships across time. *Family Relations, 52*, 318-331.

Hetherington, E. M., & Kelly, J. (2002). *For better or for worse: Divorce reconsidered*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Hughes, J. (2000). Repartnering after divorce. *Family Matters, 55,* 16-21.

Kinniburgh-White, R., Cartwright, C., & Seymour, F. (2010, in press). Young adults' narratives of relational development with stepfathers. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships.*

Johnson, D., & Wu, J. (2002). An empirical test of crisis, social selection, and role explanations of the relationship between marital disruption and psychological distress: A pooled time-series analysis of four-wave panel data. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 64*, 211-224.

Lewis, J. (2006). Repartnering and the Management of Risk. *International Journal of Law and Family Policy, 20*, 151-168.

Merriam, S. B. (2002). Introduction to qualitative research. In S. B. a. A. Merriam (Ed.), *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis* (pp. 3-18). San Francisco, CA.: Jossey-Bass.

Nicholson, J., Fergusson, D., & Horwood, L. (1999). Effects on later adjustment of living in a stepfamily during childhood and adolescence. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 40*, 405-416.

Papernow, P. (2006). "Blended family" relationships: Helping people who live in stepfamilies. *Family Therapy Magazine, 5,* 34-42.

Poortman, A-R. (2007). The first cut is the deepest? The role of the relationship career for union formation. *European Sociological Review, 23,* 585-598.

Qu, L., & Weston, R. (2005). Snapshot of couple families with stepparent–child relationships. *Family Matters*, *70*, 36–37.

Robertson, J. (2008). Stepfathers in families. In J. Pryor (Ed.), *The International Handbook of Stepfamilies: Policy and practice in legal, research, and clinical environments* (pp. 125-150). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Rodwell, J. (2002). *Repartnered families*. Auckland, New Zealand: Penguin Books.

Sandelowski, M. (2000). Focus on research methods: Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing and Health, 23*, 334-340.

Schmeige, C., Richards, L., & Zvonkovic, Z. (2001). Remarriage: For love or money? *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage, 36*, 123-141.

Smith, M. (2008). Resident mothers in stepfamilies. In *The international handbook of stepfamilies: Policy and practice in legal, research, and clinical environments* (pp. 151-174). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Smith, A. B., Gollop, M. M., Taylor, G. W., & Tapp, P. (2001). *Children whose parents live apart: Family and legal concepts*. Dunedin, New Zealand: Children's Issues Centre.

Stewart, S. (2007). *Brave new families: Diverse paths towards stepfamily living*. London: Sage.

Stewart, D., Manning, W., & Smock, P. (2003). Union formation among men in the US: Does having prior children matter? *Journal of Marriage and Family, 65,* 90-104.

Statistics New Zealand (2004). Ethnic population projections: Issues and trends. Retrieved from http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/population/estimates_and_projections/ethnic-pop-projections-issues-and-trends.aspx

Statistics New Zealand (2007). Demographic trends 2007: Marriage, civil union and divorce. Retrieved from http://www.stats.govt.nz/~/media/statistics/publications/population/demographic-trends-2007/chapter3-marriage-civil-union-divorce.aspx

Teachman, J., & Tedrow, L. (2008). The demography of stepfamilies in the United States. In J. Pryor (Ed.), *The international handbook of stepfamilies: Policy and practice in legal, research, and clinical environments*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Visher, J., & Visher, E. (1988). *Old loyalties, new ties: Therapeutic strategies with stepfamilies.* New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Weaver, S., & Coleman, M. (2005). *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 22,* 477-497.

Wu, Z., & Schimmele, C. H. (2005). Repartnering after first union disruption. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 67*, 27-36.