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Experiences of Adolescent Stepchildren in the Stepfamily Context in Ghana: A Qualitative Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT



Globally, family systems are being diversified as most children are no longer living with their biological parents due to divorce, remarriage, separation and unmarried personhood leading to a rise in stepfamilies. Despite the rise of stepfamilies in the sub-Saharan African countries, they have been largely under-studied, especially among the adolescent population. This study explored the nature of experiences and their determining factors as well as impact on adolescent stepchildren in the Ghanaian context. A purposive sample of 22 adolescents who were living or had lived in a stepfamily household in the Koforidua Metropolis of Ghana were interviewed; and their responses analyzed thematically. Findings show that stepchildren had both pleasant and unpleasant experiences which had psychological, social and academic implications to their wellbeing. Precipitating factors bothered on stepchildren's conduct, lack of blood ties between stepchildren and stepfamilies and lack of prospective benefits to stepparents. These findings underscore the need for psychological interventions for adolescents within the stepfamily context to help address the unpleasant experiences that may negatively impact on their social and psychological wellbeing.

KEYWORDS

Stepfamily; adolescent stepchildren; stepparent; experiences; precipitating factors

Introduction

Family is regarded as the most universal and significant system of socialization (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Nixon, 2012). As the oldest and most enduring form of social grouping, the family provides a sense of stability to the individual and a context for their survival, sustenance and long-term development (McKie & Callan, 2012). There are several family systems including the nuclear family, single parent family, extended family, family without children, grandparent family and stepfamily (Edwards, 2009). Of the several existing family structures, stepfamilies are recently on the rise, have become one of the commonest family systems in the world, especially in the western context (Gonzales, 2009; McGee, 2012; Sweeney, 2010); and are of interest to researchers working on family structures (Salifu Yendork et al., *in press*).

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The term stepfamily originated from the Anglo-Saxon word “*Steop*” meaning to bereave or to make orphan (Bray & Berger, 1992). This term was applied to children whose parents had died. However, globally in recent times, family systems are being diversified as most children are no longer living with their biological parents due to divorce, remarriage, separation and unmarried personhood (Brown, 2010; Gonzales, 2009). Thus, the nature of stepfamilies has changed over the years as contemporary stepfamilies are now formed as a result of divorce, separation or unmarried motherhood contrary to the traditional stepfamilies which were solely as a result of parental death (Hetherington, 1999; Sage, 2007).

The situation of stepfamilies may not be as pervasive in sub-Saharan Africa where the extended family system is prominent and provides significant support for its members (see, Gabrielli et al., 2015; Ringson & Chereni, 2020). However, with current global trends in low-income countries in the form of unemployment, poverty, family conflict, and neglect, other family systems including stepfamilies are gradually becoming a common family system within sub-Saharan African countries (Adjiwanou et al., 2021; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). This notwithstanding, the stepfamily system has largely been under studied, especially among the adolescent population (Clark & Brauner-Otto, 2015; Lawson et al., 2016).

Adolescence is a crucial point in the life course and associated with several challenges including accomplishing critical developmental tasks and avoiding risky behaviors (Crockett & Silbereisen, 2000; Kipping et al., 2015). During the period of transition, adolescents desire independence and are likely to spend more time with their peers (Furstenberg, 2000). Families often experience conflicts with them and are less involved in their interactions (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). These challenges are often escalated in stepfamilies (Bray & Easling, 2005; Sweeney, 2010). Stepfamilies have been regarded as inherently complicated as a result of the rearrangement of several new family relationships along with existing relationships (Dupuis, 2010; Shalay & Brownlee, 2007).

Studies are reporting that the uncertainties and conflicts associated with stepfamily relationships have negative effects on stepchildren and stepparents (Hoenayi & Salifu Yendork, 2018; Salifu Yendork et al., *in press*; Schrodtt & Afifi, 2007). Individuals in these families experience several emotional challenges as they interact and navigate the new experiences and relationships associated with stepfamilies (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). There are also boundary issues such as new rules and instructions in the new family relationship which are often ambiguous and arise due to the changing households on a regular basis and intrusion from a nonresident parent (Salifu Yendork et al., *in press*). Moreover, conflicts surrounding loyalty are very common in stepfamilies as most children believe that respecting and showing care to a stepparent represents a betrayal of the nonresident biological parent (Koerner, 2003; Salifu Yendork et al., *in press*;

Stoll et al., 2006). Issues of discipline and control often cause conflicts and tension between step-parents and stepchildren as the latter believe that they are not supposed to be disciplined by persons who are not their blood relatives (Salifu Yendork et al., *in press*).

While both stepparents and stepchild have their fair share of challenges in the stepfamily (Hoenayi & Salifu Yendork, 2018; Salifu Yendork et al., *in press*), research has shown that living in a stepfamily has diverse effects on the emotional health of stepchildren. Some of the negative effects include shame, anger, fear and hostility associated with bickering, arguing, and fighting they had observed during conflicts and subsequent divorce of their parents (Afifi, 2008; Oppawsky, 2000). Studies in the African context have shown experiences of abuse and discrimination of stepchildren, severe disciplinary measures and neglect of stepchildren in stepfamilies (Bowman & Brundige, 2014; Hoenayi & Salifu Yendork, 2018; Rwezaura, 2000).

Despite the challenges of stepchildren in stepfamilies, studies have shown that most of them are resilient in the face of their challenges. Studies have shown that the gradual establishment of positive relationships in the form of respect and understanding between stepparents and stepchildren is critical to the enduring growth of their relationship (Ganong et al., 2011; Schrodt, 2006). In certain situations, children have been found to report a sense of relief and joy as their parents separate due to the constant conflict and fighting they witnessed from their parents (Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 2001). A recent study in Ghana found that young adult stepchildren reported receipt of material and emotional support (Hoenayi & Salifu Yendork, 2018). Effective communication is also an important channel through which family systems, especially stepfamilies, deal with their challenges (Beaudry et al., 2004; Vangelisti, 2004). Overall, positive experiences that lead to psychological growth arise from positive parent-child support systems (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; King et al., 2015).

Several factors have been cited as the determinants of the nature of relationship between stepchildren and stepparents. For example, the lack of emotional bonds and the opportunity for mutual growth and adaptation often found between biological parents and their children are key (Cartwright & Moore, 2012; Pryor, 2004). A study also found that both the perceived quality of relationship between stepfathers and stepmothers and their adolescent children strongly predicted the feelings of family belongingness (King et al., 2015). Young adult stepchildren cited the personality of the stepparent, financial constraints, stepparents' past familial experiences and issues surrounding inheritance as key determinants to their experiences (Hoenayi & Salifu Yendork, 2018). Sibling relationships are also key to the development of stepfamily relationship (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Visher & Visher, 2003) as stepsiblings are the center of conflicts, rivalry and mistreatment in stepfamilies (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). The previous relationship between a child and their

biological parents determines the nature of the current relationship in the stepfamilies and especially the development of positive sense of belonging (Leake, 2007). Stepparents also cited factors such as intrusion from nonresidential parent, certain characteristics of the stepchild and the nature of partner's support as the key determinants of the nature of relationship within the stepfamily household (Salifu Yendork et al., *in press*). The support and warmth from stepparents have the potential to positively influence the child to become understanding and caring (Ganong et al., 2011; Schrodtt, 2006).

Given that stepfamilies have become increasingly pervasive globally and becoming prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa, the dearth of research is baffling. Most of the research has been done in Western countries, with few in Africa and particularly Ghana. In the Ghanaian context, only two studies could be traced by the researchers. One study (Hoenayi & Salifu Yendork, 2018) explored the experiences of young adult stepchildren in the university. The second study explored the experiences of stepparents in the Eastern Region of Ghana (Salifu Yendork et al., *in press*). The current study builds on these previous Ghanaian studies to explore the experiences of adolescent stepchildren. The current study focuses on adolescents as it is a very critical period of development and several studies have indicated that adolescents from stepfamilies report lower well-being than adolescents in two biological-parent families (Bray & Easling, 2005; Sweeney, 2010). Therefore, we argue that a better understanding of stepfamily processes during this crucial period is warranted. Moreover, there are sparse studies that have explored adjustment of adolescents in stepfamilies in Ghana. To address these gaps, the current study seeks to answer the following three research questions: 1) What are the experiences of adolescent stepchildren in stepfamilies? 2) What are the factors responsible for their experiences? And 3) What is the impact of living in a stepfamily on the wellbeing of adolescent stepchildren?

Methods

Research design

A qualitative approach was employed in this study as it allows researchers to explore social interactions, systems and processes as well as enables researchers to gain in-depth understanding of individuals' subjective experiences (Creswell, 2014). Specifically, a descriptive qualitative research design with a phenomenological overtone was used for the present study since it focuses on exploring and gaining in-depth understanding into people's subjective experiences (Creswell, 2014; Sandelowski, 2000). The use of this approach therefore aided in exploring the experiences of adolescent stepchildren

without the imposition of the researchers' preconceived ideas. In-depth interviews were used to collect data through a semi-structured interview guide, which allows flexibility in how questions were posed (Turner, 2010).

Research settings and participants

The study was conducted in Koforidua, the Eastern regional capital of Ghana. This setting was chosen because of increased incidence of child abuse perpetuated by stepparents in the media. 22 adolescent stepchildren who were living in or had lived within a stepfamily household partook in the research. Their age ranged between 13 and 19 years. Of the 22 adolescents, 17 (77%) were males while five (23%) were females. 17 (77%) participants were in the Senior High School, two (9%) in the Junior High School and three (14%) in the tertiary institutions. 21 participants (95%) were Christian, and one (5%) was Muslim. Regarding the whereabouts of the non-custodial biological parents, two (9%) were dead and 20 (91%) had divorced and were remarried. It is worth mentioning that more than half of the adolescents (14 representing 64%) belonged to the stepmother stepfamily. Finally, the highest number of years lived in a stepfamily household was 11 years.

Procedure

Adolescent stepchildren were selected from schools in the Koforidua metropolis hence letters were sent to gatekeepers, who were mainly the head teachers at the various schools. The letters were used to gain access to the school for the conduction of interviews with students who were eligible and willing to take part in the study. The data collection process begun only after the head teachers of the schools had granted the researchers permission to interview the adolescents. The head teachers of schools were used to gain access to the participants instead of parents so as to avoid putting the adolescent stepchildren into any compromising situation in their various households after the research was over. The decision to seek consent from head of schools instead of parents was informed by Morris et al. (2012) who stated that research with children who are liable to risks such as being punished for speaking up by close relations requires that researchers consider other innovative and safe research methods that would allow children to give information about sensitive issues while at the same time ensuring the protection of the right of children. Furthermore, this was done to ensure that participants felt comfortable in expressing themselves and to ensure they felt secured in their environment and were not worried about whether they would be heard by their stepparents or any family member. Hence, the participants were interviewed during break periods when the classrooms were empty.

Following approval by the head teachers, students who met the inclusion criteria were approached and were briefed on the aims and objectives of the study. Those who agreed to partake in the study were included. In order to protect the rights of the participants, strict ethical procedures were followed where assent forms were given to be read and their signatures appended before data collection began. The first author was present to provide further clarification to those who needed explanation on the contents of the assent form. Participants were informed that data would be collected through one-on-one interviews and audiotaped and that the interviews would be transcribed and analyzed. In order to ensure privacy and confidentiality, a serene environment devoid of distractions and away from the hearing of other children and teachers was used so that participants could express themselves freely about their experiences in the stepfamily household. Interviews were mainly conducted in empty classrooms provided by the head teachers. All interviews were conducted by the first author, mostly at the school premises and lasted between 13 and 45 minutes. After data collection, all interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed.

Ethical consideration

Ethical clearance was sought from the Ethics Committee for Humanities (Reference ECH: 043/18-19) of the University of Ghana. Informed assent was sought and obtained from each participant. Confidentiality was assured as pseudonyms were used instead of participants' real names. Interviews were also conducted in serene environments away from the hearing and presence of other people. Again, data gathered were kept under lock and key and were only available to the researchers. Voluntary participation was ensured as participants' right to withdraw from the study or refuse to participate in this research at any point without any consequence was emphasized.

Data analysis

Transcribed interviews were manually analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedure for thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen because of its flexibility, the opportunity to analyze data from several participants and to capture unexpected responses from the participants. The steps included getting familiarized with the data, generating initial codes, looking for themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes and producing a final report. At the data familiarization stage, the first author listened and re-listened to the audio recordings several times before starting the transcription process. Then the transcripts were read through several times to enable the researchers immerse themselves into the data and also to get familiarized with the complex nature of the data thereby aiding in identifying patterns in the

data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To generate initial codes, relevant meaningful segments of the transcripts were identified and labeled. These initial codes were recorded into Excel with the code name recorded in the column and the participant ID recorded in the rows. To identify themes, initial codes were merged to form broader themes based on their similarities and differences. Main themes with related subthemes were also identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The next stage involved reviewing themes where refinement and review of identified themes were done. Themes that fitted together were joined while those that did not were put under other distinct themes. In this phase, answers to the research questions helped in reviewing of the themes. Afterward, themes and subthemes identified in the previous phases were named and described. Quotes and the researchers' narratives were then organized in a coherent pattern (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final stage involved producing a final report where detailed description of the data, supported by excerpts from participants, was presented in the report to illustrate participants' experiences.

Trustworthiness

In order to ensure trustworthiness of the study, some procedures recommended by Shenton (2004) were adhered to. In order to ensure credibility of the study, quality voice recorders were used to record the interviews, probes were used to gain broader information from the participants, participants were interviewed at serene environments free from distractions and the hearing of other people in the environment and they were encouraged to be truthful. Regular debriefing sessions were held among the researchers to develop ideas for the research and during data analyses, a back-and-forth interaction among researchers and a number of revisions ensured that the results reflected participants' experiences. To ensure transferability, a complete depiction of the phenomenon explored was reported to allow a comparison with previous studies conducted in similar situations. Detailed information about the study procedure, which includes information on the number of participants, the study area, the data collection procedures, the number of data collected and the time period over which the interviews lasted were all emphasized in the research. Thematic analysis guided the researchers in capturing the experiences of stepparents into various themes rather than presenting recommended accounts into hypothetical assumptions making the findings of the current study confirmable.

Findings

In this study we identified three main themes; namely, nature of experiences, precipitating factors that led to their experiences and the impact of the experiences on stepchildren's wellbeing. These themes are described in the ensuing sections.

Nature of experiences

Stepchildren had both *pleasant* and *unpleasant experiences* in their stepfamily settings. Pleasant experiences are positive experiences that influence the life of the stepchild in a meaningful way. Here participants identified issues such as receipt of support, spending fun time with stepparents, having a sense of family and enjoying familial unity with half siblings as key sub-themes of pleasant experiences. Stepchildren recounted how they enjoyed emotional (such as warmth, mediation of parent-child conflicts), tangible (such as money, payment of school fees) and informational support (such as guidance and training in self-care skills) from their stepparents. Some of the stepchildren recounted how the payment of school fees and the receipt of other materials from their stepparents served as a good experience for them. Some of these positive experiences also showed in the quality time stepparents and stepchildren had watching television, visiting restaurants, going out on holidays and simply engaging in fun activities together. These positive experiences brought enjoyment and close ties in the family unit and led to a sense of belongingness in the family which eroded the feeling of being a “stepchild” to the stepparent:

He provides whatever or anything I ask him . . . anything . . . for example, . . . if I ask him for money to do something or go somewhere he gives it to me. He is the one sponsoring my education. (Francis, male, 17 years stepfather)

Despite the pleasant experiences enjoyed in the stepfamily household, quite a number of the stepchildren recalled many instances of unpleasant experiences. These experiences ranged from favoritism, conflicted household, starvation, overworking, abuse, excessive corporal punishment, rivalry and being misunderstood. Majority of the stepchildren expressed their displeasure about how stepsiblings were given preferential treatment than them regarding how house chores, food and other materials were distributed. Stepchildren also narrated how they experienced unwarranted severe physical punishment which included being beaten, slapped, kicked and starved for minor wrongdoing. Other abuses emerged in the form of humiliation and sexual harassment:

Sometimes I think he does that [punishes me] from pain because [chuckling] . . . it seems anything I do make[s] him angry and for that he cane[s] me. When I'm not doing the right thing . . . he's supposed to cane me but the way he cane(s) me (chuckling) like I've stolen something from him. When he's using cane, he can use it all over my body and he'll cane me roughly. At times when caning me he can knock me down like I'm his [age mate] fighting with him. (Paa, male, 15 years, stepfather)

. . . I was taking my bath then I stepped out only to realize someone was peeping through the keyhole of the bathroom . . . It was a compound house. And it was him [stepfather]. (Cynthia, female, 19 years, stepfather)

Frequent conflicts were distressing to the stepchildren and caused some to blame themselves for the conflict, whereas others felt they were misunderstood by their stepparent and subsequently disengage from them. Rivalry between children and their stepparent also emerged strongly and stemmed from competition for the biological parent's attention. A participant recounted instances when she could not spend time with her father alone as her stepmother made this almost impossible:

At some time when I go there, I felt like [there was] a competition between me and her [stepmother] for my dad. . . . kind of seeking attention . . . When my dad is around and she realizes I'm coming to talk to him, then she'll come and sit beside him and I'll just walk out. (Aisha, female, 19 years, stepmother)

Precipitating factors for both pleasant and unpleasant experiences

When participants were asked to explain their perception of the precipitating factors for experiences in the stepfamily context, they mentioned that their conduct, a stepparent's appraisal of benefits to be derived from the stepchild and the blood relations between the stepchild and stepparent were the main factors that determined the kind of relationship or experience they had in their various stepfamilies. The stepchildren's conduct in the stepfamily setting emerged as a strong determining factor in how stepparents treated them. Participants explained that when they conducted themselves well by being respectful and humble, they experienced love from stepparents. Those who were disrespectful and arrogant were unlikely to have experiences that were positive.

. . . If you respect your step-parent he or she will like you. Maybe the other children staying with their stepparent may feel this man or this woman is not my real parent so the person wouldn't respect and listen to his or her advice and that will create problem(s) between the parent and the children. That is what I do. In the morning, I wash his car and then iron his attire and he'll leave for work. (Kofi, male, 18 years, stepfather)

Participants reported that a stepparent's appraisal of the sort of benefits that will be derived from the stepchild in future affected the quality of stepparent-stepchild relationship which in turn determines the experiences that will exist in the stepfamily context.

. . . Everyone will take care of their child. Because right now . . . if I'm the richest man on earth, I don't think she can get money but when her child is the richest, she will benefit'. (Solomon, male, 18 years, stepmother)

Some of the stepchildren in the study perceived that they encountered negative experiences because they were not biologically related to their stepparents. Also, the quality of relationship between a stepchild and a biological parent was perceived to precipitate the experiences they encountered in the stepfamily household:

So during these times when my stepfather wasn't giving me face [was cold towards me], I didn't allow it to disturb because I'm not his biological child . . . especially after I visit my biological father and I return, he doesn't treat me nicely at all. I don't know if it's because he doesn't want me to see my family members or not. (James, male, 15 years, stepfather)

Impact of experiences

The study also explored the impact of stepchildren's experiences on their wellbeing. Findings showed stepchildren's experiences in the stepfamily context had psychological, social and academic impacts.

Regarding psychological impacts, stepchildren narrated how the pleasant experiences within the stepfamily household positively affected their wellbeing. The experiences comprised of positive emotions, feelings of belongingness, acceptance and the development of a sense of purpose in life. These pleasant experiences led some stepchildren to develop likeness for their new parents and hardiness:

I am happy. They treat me as though I am their biological child. (Akosua, female, 16 years, stepmother)

Conversely, adverse experiences negatively impacted on the wellbeing of the participants. Participants reported feeling psychologically distressed, some isolated themselves, others were anxious and felt left-out. Some perceived they were neglected in their new homes by both biological parent and step-parent and did not feel a part of the family. This was mainly as a result of favoritism existing in the stepfamily where biological children were treated better than stepchildren as well as lack of love and attention from biological parent in the stepfamily household:

. . . sometimes he comes to take them out and buys certain things for them . . . when he buys something for them, he doesn't buy some for me . . . unless my mum says it . . . then he'll buy it . . . and my mum doesn't also give me love and attention. Sometimes I feel like I'm adopted (Flora, female, 15 years, stepfather)

Social impacts resulted mainly from the negative experiences that emerged from the household. Participants felt the need to search for affirmation, find alternative means of survival and desired to escape from the distress. Particularly for young girls, consistent neglect in the family, lack of attention and familial unity caused them to seek attention elsewhere. Others who experienced disparity in how resources in the family were shared resorted to finding menial jobs that earned them some money to cater for their needs even though they were young and still in school. Others also pondered running away from their homes because of the persistency in how they were ill-treated.

When there are left over meals from her children, she asks us if we want to eat it, and we tell her we've already eaten. It wasn't good. If we have money, we buy our own food . . . because we do some small jobs . . . Construction works so that we can have some money to buy food (Hanson, male, 17 years, stepmother)

Some of the participants recounted that adverse relationships in the home affected their education and resulted in academic difficulties. Two participants reported academic challenges as a result of excessive household chores they engaged in which resulted in exhaustion. This made it difficult for them to study. One eventually dropped out of school for some time. They lamented:

Again, the way I used to learn when I was at my brother's place changed when I got to my father's place. I work a lot and end up sleeping because I get tired. When I wake up too, I'm not able to study my books well because I have body aches. But I was able to study for long hours at my brother's place. So my academics fell. I used to take either the first or second position. At my father's place, I fell at the seventh position. I was doing better in school in the village than in the city (Boateng, male, 17 years, stepmother)

Discussion

In this study, we explored the nature of experiences and their determining factors as well as the impact of those experiences on adolescent stepchildren in the Ghanaian context. Three main themes emerged from the data analyzed and these were guided by the research questions. Although it is generally known that stepfamily households are associated with negative encounters, this study revealed that experiences in the household were neither entirely pleasant nor unpleasant, which had psychological, social and academic implications to their wellbeing. Precipitating factors for these experiences bothered on stepchildren's conduct, lack of blood ties between stepchildren and stepparents and prospective benefits to stepparents. These findings generally confirm results of previous studies that have found a combination of both positive and negative experiences in the stepfamily household (e.g., Beninger, 2011; Hoenayi & Salifu Yendork, 2018; Mansell, 2011).

In this study, our participants reported pleasant experiences which included receipt of support from their stepparents, spending time with stepparents, engaging in enjoyable activities, having a sense of family and the cordial relationship enjoyed with step or half siblings. These findings, when critically considered, are ordinary experiences every child should have. However, the stepchildren do not feel entitled to these positive experiences, hence, encountering them in the stepfamily setting was much appreciated. The presence of pleasant experiences such as receiving support, engaging in conversations with stepparents, talking over problems and spending time together as a family echoes findings of previous studies (Beninger, 2011; Ganong et al., 2011; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hoenayi & Salifu Yendork, 2018). The majority

of these positive experiences were encountered at the beginning stages of the stepfamily where stepparents were eager to form positive relationships with stepchildren, hence, engaged in activities that would make any family thrive. This resonates with the early stages of Papernow's (1984) experiential model of stepfamily development where members of the stepfamily try to live out the kind of experiences they envisage a stepfamily to be and this accounts for the children's positive experiences.

Furthermore, we also observed that the majority of the support received by the stepchildren was tangible in nature. Specifically, the payment of school fees and other financial needs were mostly performed by stepfathers of the stepchildren interviewed whereas support which were nonfinancial in nature such as emotional support and informational support were provided by the stepmothers. This finding is unique to this study as it reflects the Ghanaian cultural distribution of labor in the household in which fathers are expected to be the breadwinners of the home whereas mothers engage in care giving activities which may not necessarily be financial in nature (Archampong, 2010).

Notwithstanding the pleasant experiences, some of the participants reported unpleasant experiences which include favoritism, conflicted households, abuse, excessive corporal punishment, sibling rivalry and being misunderstood. Notably, stepmothers were identified as key perpetrators of the unpleasant experiences encountered in the stepfamily household. This pattern was not surprising as stepmothers perform more domestic responsibilities and are more likely to spend a considerable amount of time with stepchildren than their male counterparts (Clingempeel & Segal, 1986; Lamb, 2007). It has been asserted that the frequent contacts stepmothers have with stepchildren places them at a higher risk of stress and frustration (Lamb, 2007) from parenting resulting in displacement of anger and frustration on the stepchildren. The unpleasant experiences encountered by the stepchildren in the stepfamily household can also be explained by the kin selection theory (Hamilton, 1964) which posits that individuals are more likely to engage in altruistic behaviors that are likely to enhance the survival odds of their genes while unrelated ones are antagonized with the aim of bringing them into extinction. In this context, stepparents may have perceived the stepchildren as "biologically unrelated" to them, which influenced how they treated their stepchildren. The negative treatments meted out to the stepchildren may have resulted from the desire to eliminate the competition over limited resources that may be reserved for the stepparent's biological children.

Furthermore, the result of severe corporal punishment as a negative experience is consistent with findings of previous studies where stepchildren within the African setting were severely punished by their stepparents (Beninger, 2011; Hoenayi & Salifu Yendork, 2018). Within the Ghanaian setting, it is not out of context for children to experience corporal punishment as a form of disciplinary measure even among biological parents of children (Twum-

Danso Imoh, 2013). However, in this study, participants reported that such corporal punishments were so severe that the stepchildren felt they were being punished for reasons other than the offenses they perceived to have committed. The severity of punishment meted out by these stepparents no longer served as a corrective measure but were perceived as abuse by the stepchildren. The stepchildren were left with physical bruises as a result of being hit, kicked and caned with unsafe objects while others were left with emotional bruises as a result of insults and humiliation. These harsh punitive measures have the tendency of negatively affecting a stepchild's self-esteem (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Hoenayi & Salifu Yendork, 2018; Mansell, 2011; Perry-Fraser & Fraser, 2017; Pruett et al., 2003). Feelings of worthlessness, shame or timidity are likely to result from being humiliated and insulted (Claxton-Oldfield, 2000; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Hoenayi & Salifu Yendork, 2018; Mansell, 2011; Perry-Fraser & Fraser, 2017; Pruett et al., 2003).

In this study, sexual harassment was reported as a negative experience in the form of voyeurism. Such illicit sexual behaviors toward stepchildren may end up in sexual abuse. This finding supports previous studies in Western context (e.g., MacIntyre & Carr, 1999; Meiselman, 1990; Sammut, 2014) where stepdaughters, specifically, living in stepfamily households have been found to be abused sexually by their stepfathers. This could be explained from a point of view of a stepparent (stepfathers especially) who does not regard a stepchild as a biological child hence any sexual encounter may seem acceptable and not regarded as incest (Sammut, 2014). Also, protective instincts that come naturally to biological fathers generally may be absent or inadequate in a stepfather resulting in such sexual harassment which has the tendency of developing into an abuse (Sammut, 2014). Any form of illicit sexual attempt, whether abuse or harassment can have adverse effects on a child's wellbeing, especially those performed by people who are regarded as close relations. Sexually abused children may suffer severe depression accompanied with psychotic features, lose interest in school or may have emotional disturbances of anger, aggressiveness or be disruptive (MacIntyre & Carr, 1999; Meiselman, 1990). Also, sexually harassed children are at risk of developing anxiety, low self-esteem, and post-traumatic stress disorders (Mannarino, Cohen, Smith & Moore-Motily, 1991).

Stepchildren perceived that factors such as their good conduct led them to experiencing positive relations with their stepparents whereas a stepparent's negative appraisal of benefits to be derived from the stepchild and the lack of blood relations shared were the main factors that caused a negative stepparent-stepchild relationship. The finding of a stepchild's good conduct as a precipitating factor for pleasant experiences in the stepfamily corroborates with a study by Crohn (2010) who reported that without any biological connection, stepparents find it extremely difficult to tolerate or even like a stepchild who is particularly being recalcitrant. Treating a biological child well comes naturally for parents (regardless of their behavior) as explained

by the kin selection (Daly & Wilson, 1996). However, more effort is needed in taking care of a child who is unrelated. Nevertheless, this is made easier when a stepchild is well behaved. According to the family systems theory, once each person in a family unit performs his role well, it has a rippling effect on the other members in the family (Becvar & Becvar, 2013; O’Gorman, 2012; Rothbaum et al., 2002). Subsequently, performing the role of an obedient child in a family resulted in good parenting from a stepparent.

It was found that experiences in the stepfamily affected the wellbeing of the stepchildren. Experiences led to psychological, social and academic impacts. Psychologically, as stepchildren began to realize a stepparent’s positive contributions to the biological parent and other members in the stepfamily, they began to view the stepfamily in a positive light which eventually led to acceptance and happiness. This finding is in line with other literature that found that a sense of belongingness, acceptance and positive emotions were reported as stepchildren began to appreciate the presence of a stepparent in their lives (Mansell, 2011; Ganong et al., 2011). The coming in of a stepparent may probably have resulted in better living standards for both stepchildren and parents which may not have been so previously. As a result of the additional benefits that came with having a stepparent, the stepchildren were happy and accepted the new change.

In this study, we found that the harsh treatments experienced by these stepchildren made them anxious and develop feelings of being unloved. The harsh experiences led some of the children to search for affection outside of their homes. This was particularly so for the females where they perceived they could find comfort from a boyfriend since none was provided in their own homes. The finding again resonates with literature which reveals that stepchildren form intimate relationships and engage in sexual activities so early resulting in having children at very young ages (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Furthermore, findings showed that the children resorted to finding menial jobs that earned them some money because they were deprived of basic necessities of life. This was due to the fact that stepchildren were disadvantaged when it came to the distribution of resources in the home. These children, despite their young age are left with no choice than to fend for themselves. Pryor and Rodgers (2001) in a previous study have also found that stepchildren adopt grown up roles and leave home early. Therefore, it was not surprising that some participants in our study found the home to be unbearable and pondered escaping. This finding corresponds with Hoenayi and Salifu Yendork (2018) finding where participants considered streetism as an escape route from difficulties experienced in the stepfamily home. As indicated in most empirical studies (Claxton-Oldfield, 2000; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Mansell,

2011; Perry-Fraser & Fraser, 2017; Pruett et al., 2003) it was found that the stepchildren were faced with academic difficulties whereas some even dropped out of school.

Implications and recommendations for interventions

Adolescent stepchildren experienced difficulties in their stepfamily setting. The difficulties encountered had adverse effects on their social and psychological wellbeing. In order to prevent psychological distress among stepchildren, it is necessary that clinical psychologists are trained to address the peculiar challenges that stepfamily members face. Again, findings from the study also showed that stepchildren had academic challenges due to adverse experiences in their stepfamilies. Stakeholders of education should be trained and resourced on how to address the peculiar needs of stepchildren in schools. The services of school and educational psychologists to mitigate the adverse effects on stepchildren would be helpful. Finally, more avenues should be created for stepchildren to be able to express their grievances in the family contexts without being victimized. The findings of this study are similar to those found in other contexts where the phenomenon of stepfamilies has been studied. Therefore, the recommendations outlined here do not only apply to the Ghanaian context where the study was conducted but to stepfamilies in other contexts.

Conclusion

In this study, we explored the nature of experiences and their determining factors as well as impact on adolescent stepchildren in the Ghanaian context. We found that within the stepfamily context, stepchildren are exposed to both pleasant and unpleasant experiences which influenced their psychological and social life and academic performance. These experiences were perceived to be precipitated by stepchildren's conduct, lack of blood ties between stepchildren and stepparents and lack of prospective benefits to stepparents. These findings underscore the need for psychological interventions for adolescents within the stepfamily context in order to help address the unpleasant experiences that may have negative effect on their social and psychological wellbeing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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