



Generative Relationships in Stepfamilies: Resources, Innovations, and Family Learnings

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Ana-María Gil-Ríos

Universidad del Quindío, Armenia, Colombia



Abstract

This article examines the generative relationships developed within stepfamilies in Colombia's Coffee-Growing Region, contributing to a broader understanding of these family configurations beyond deficit-oriented perspectives. The study aimed to explore the family discourses and generative relationships that family members construct around their family organization; this article specifically focuses on findings related to generativity. A qualitative study was conducted with 25 stepfamilies (50 participants, including biological and stepparents, as well as biological and stepchildren). Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using a thematic-interpretive approach. The findings reveal that these families build generative relationships through family resources, relational innovations, and collective learning processes that strengthen their patterns of coexistence and interpersonal relationships. The study concludes that, even in contexts marked by tension and complexity, stepfamilies develop creative forms of organization and care that expand traditional understandings of parenthood, kinship, and contemporary family life.

Keywords

Stepfamilies; generative relationships; family resources; relational innovations; family learnings.

Registration

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Relaciones generativas en familias ensambladas: recursos, innovaciones y aprendizajes familiares

Resumen

Este artículo examina las relaciones generativas desarrolladas al interior de las familias ensambladas en la Región Cafetera de Colombia, contribuyendo a una comprensión más amplia de estas configuraciones familiares más allá de las perspectivas orientadas al déficit. El estudio tuvo como objetivo explorar los discursos familiares y las relaciones generativas que los miembros de la familia construyen en torno a su organización familiar; este artículo se centra específicamente en los hallazgos relacionados con la generatividad. Se realizó un estudio cualitativo con 25 familias ensambladas (50 participantes, incluyendo padres biológicos y padrastros/madrastras, así como hijos biológicos e hijastros). Los datos se recolectaron a través de entrevistas en profundidad y se analizaron mediante un enfoque temático-interpretativo. Los hallazgos revelan que estas familias construyen relaciones generativas a través de recursos familiares, innovaciones relacionales y procesos de aprendizaje colectivo que fortalecen sus patrones de convivencia y sus relaciones interpersonales. El estudio concluye que, incluso en contextos marcados por la tensión y la complejidad, las familias ensambladas desarrollan formas creativas de organización y cuidado que amplían las comprensiones tradicionales de la paternidad/maternidad, el parentesco y la vida familiar contemporánea.

Palabras clave

Familias reconstituidas; relaciones generativas; recursos familiares; innovaciones relacionales; aprendizajes familiares.

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1. Introduction

Stepfamilies constitute an increasingly common family form in contemporary societies ([Cherlin, 2017](#)). Rising divorce rates, together with the growing emphasis placed on individual life projects and personal fulfillment, have facilitated the dissolution of conjugal relationships and created opportunities for the formation of new family configurations. Stepfamilies emerge from a couple relationship in which one or both partners have children—whether co-residing or not—from previous relationships. As a result, they challenge the traditional nuclear family model by redefining key dimensions such as marriage, kinship, co-residence, and biparentality.

Despite their increasing prevalence, stepfamilies remain “relatively invisible and difficult to identify” ([Théry, 1987, p. 132](#)), as they are often conflated with other family forms, such as nuclear or extended families.

The lack of appropriate tools for identifying stepfamilies ([Ajenjo-Cosp and García Saladrinas, 2016](#)), together with the tendency to interpret them through the lens of the dominant biparental model, has constrained their social, institutional, and legal recognition. This situation hinders a fuller understanding of their distinctive characteristics and contributes to the persistence of perspectives that relegate family diversity to a secondary position. Consequently, although stepfamilies are often perceived as a relatively marginal phenomenon, they have become an established family form with their own characteristics, dynamics, and challenges ([Visser and Visser, 1988](#)).

Although stepfamilies are not a recent phenomenon, the circumstances leading to stepfamily formation have changed over time. Historically, they were primarily formed following the death of one spouse. Today, however, stepfamilies are more commonly preceded by divorce or separation. This shift entails the continued involvement of the non-residential parent in children's lives, thereby expanding and increasing the complexity of family relationship networks.

The configuration of stepfamilies reflects the diverse life trajectories and experiences of their members. As a result, their structure, kinship boundaries, and ways of enacting motherhood and fatherhood do not conform to a single model. This diversity has led to the development of multiple classification frameworks aimed at understanding these family configurations ([Estrada-Iguíniz, 2017](#); [Jociles and Villaamil, 2008a, 2008b](#)). In addition, their relational dynamics are shaped by gender, which plays a significant role in how family members interact by generating differentiated expectations regarding what it means to be a stepfather or a stepmother, whether in contexts of co-residence or occasional contact.

Other defining features include the recognition of their origins in a prior loss or family disruption, relational ambiguity both within and beyond the family group, limited legal clarity regarding their functioning, and the challenges associated with shared parenting ([Berger, 2006](#); [Damen, 2013](#)). Accordingly, stepfamilies should be examined in light of their specific characteristics rather than as a homogeneous family reality ([Saint-Jacques, 2009](#)). Nevertheless, these features have frequently been approached from a deficit-oriented perspective.

Consistent with this trend, the scoping systematic review that informed the present study¹ revealed that the academic literature addresses a wide range of topics related to family relationships and dynamics, with a marked emphasis on the challenges, tensions, and difficulties associated with stepfamily formation. However, relatively few studies have examined the generative dimensions of stepfamily life, including the resources, relational innovations, and collective learning processes that emerge within these family

¹ For the background review, a systematic literature search was conducted based on the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, including documents in Spanish, English, and French that addressed various aspects of stepfamilies, such as conjugality, parenthood, siblinghood, grandparenthood, family trajectories, and multiple parenthood. Contributions from multiple disciplines—such as sociology, anthropology, social work, psychology, family demography, and law—were considered, and recent studies and classic texts were included, given their theoretical relevance to understanding this family configuration. After the selection and screening process, 52 articles that met the established criteria were analyzed.

configurations ([Gil and Jociles, 2025](#)). Likewise, limited attention has been paid to issues such as family members' satisfaction, their capacities and strengths, and the positive factors that contribute to the development and consolidation of family relationships ([Coleman, Ganong, Fine, 2000](#)).

In response to these gaps, the research underlying this article sought to explore the family discourses and generative relationships constructed by members of stepfamilies in relation to their family organization. The study was guided by several questions: How do family members experience the diverse trajectories of stepfamily formation? Which family discourses become dominant, and which emerge as alternative understandings of their family organization? Finally, what kinds of generative relationships are developed within the context of a newly formed stepfamily? This last question constitutes the primary focus of the analysis presented here. Accordingly, the specific objective of this article is to understand generative relationships, conceived as those expressed through the resources, innovations, new experiences, and discoveries that emerge from the distinctive ways in which stepfamilies organize family life.

Investigating this phenomenon is particularly relevant in contexts where transformations in conjugal relationships have contributed to the emergence of new family structures, as is the case in Colombia. In recent years, the country has experienced a steady increase in divorce rates. According to the most recent figures reported by the National Superintendence of Notaries and Registry ([SNR, 2024](#)), 32,567 marital dissolutions were formalized before notaries between 2023 and 2024. This figure corresponds to approximately 37 divorces for every 100 unions, illustrating the scale of the phenomenon. However, official statistics do not capture informal separations that occur outside legal procedures, suggesting that divorce rates may be substantially underreported. These trends reflect broader transformations in contemporary conjugal relationships and create conditions that facilitate the formation of new families among divorced individuals with children from previous unions. As a result, stepfamilies have become an increasingly visible family form in Colombia. Understanding their experiences is therefore essential for recognizing the challenges involved in reconfiguring emotional bonds, everyday family dynamics, and prevailing discourses on family life beyond the traditional biparental model.

These transformations are not experienced uniformly across the country; rather, they take shape in ways that reflect the specific characteristics of different regions. Consequently, analyses of family change must be situated within their particular social and cultural contexts. According to reports from the National Superintendence of Notaries and Registry, divorce rates are especially high in urban areas and in the regions of Antioquia and the Coffee-Growing Region. Given their sociocultural characteristics, these contexts provide a particularly relevant setting for examining the discourses, tensions, and transformations that shape stepfamily configurations.

The present study was conducted in Colombia's Coffee-Growing Region. In addition to the increasing prevalence of divorce, this region is characterized by cultural and social conditions that create a complex environment for family diversity, including stepfamilies. It is a predominantly mountainous area that, according to [Gutiérrez de Pineda \(1975\)](#), has historically been shaped by a strong Christian moral tradition. This legacy has contributed to the consolidation of normative and traditional understandings of family life within the collective imaginaries of the population. Such perspectives often hinder the recognition of alternative family forms and limit the visibility of their strengths and contributions. For this reason, it was considered necessary to challenge the discourses that circulate around family by recognizing the generative aspects that emerge from the diversity of family configurations and relational dynamics.

Finally, although this study is situated within the Colombian context, its relevance extends beyond the national level, as stepfamilies represent a family experience with potential for growth worldwide. From this perspective, the present study contributes to the understanding of a relevant family phenomenon, particularly in a relatively underexplored area such as the generative dimension. It therefore offers valuable analytical insights for researchers, practitioners, and institutions interested in supporting and intervening with these families, while promoting appreciative and inclusive perspectives on the contemporary transformations of family life.

2. Theoretical Framework

Consistent with the appreciative perspective outlined above, the theoretical framework of this study is grounded in a constructionist perspective, which understands family as a cultural, historical, and discursive construction, shaped through language, social practices, and everyday relationships ([Gergen, 2007, 2015](#)). From this perspective, recognizing the diversity of family forms involves questioning the hegemonic understandings that have defined family through normative models, thereby fostering broader and more contextualized interpretations of family experiences ([Beck, 2003](#); [White, 2002](#)).

Constructing narratives that make visible the potentialities, resources, values, and strengths of different family organizations contributes to the consolidation of alternative discourses about family. These discourses move beyond traditional deficit-oriented perspectives and promote more inclusive forms of understanding and relating to families among professionals, institutional actors, and society as a whole.

Expanding the possibility of recognizing extraordinary family events ([White and Epston, 1993](#)), innovations, and creative strategies within diverse family structures implies valuing their creativity, learning processes, and potentialities. This is precisely the invitation advanced by the present study.

This perspective is grounded in the importance of recognizing that discourses and language directly influence the configuration of social relationships: the meanings we attribute to the world shape the interactions through which that world is constructed ([Shotter, 2001](#)). For this reason, when dominant family and social discourses position stepfamilies from a deficit-oriented perspective, the ways of relating to them become centered on lack and deficiency. As a result, their possibilities, capacities, expressions of creativity, and relational resources remain invisible.

[Fried Schnitman \(2011a\)](#), from an appreciative and generative perspective, proposes recognizing the resources, learning processes, and innovations that individuals develop to face life's challenges. In this vein, she highlights the importance of focusing on people's strengths and possibilities, as well as on the bonds and relationships that have enabled them to overcome difficulties through collective action ([Gergen, 2015](#)). From this perspective, individuals are understood as agents capable of learning, innovating, and dealing with complex situations. It also underscores the need to recognize these processes through generative dialogues that make visible both the efforts and the resources mobilized to move forward and project themselves into the future.

The generative perspective makes it possible to approach families from a relational standpoint, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and strengthening collective actions and creativity in the construction of shared strategies. When situations are addressed in an isolated or individual manner, they do not generate the same impact.

In this sense, generative family relationships are those that promote the development of strengths, skills, solutions, and alternatives for collective change. The generative nature of relationships lies in recovering what has been achieved jointly, in the collective innovations that have made it possible to address everyday situations, and in focusing attention on future visions and the possibilities that emerge for achieving them ([Fried Schnitman, 2010](#)). Unlike relationships centered solely on the fulfillment of roles, generative relationships create opportunities for dialogue, recognition of others and their needs, and the collective co-construction of particular ways of relating.

Within this framework, the objective is to recover the potentialities present in relationships and in the individuals who constitute them ([Fried Schnitman, 2011b](#)). The emphasis is placed on the possibility of building futures by highlighting the positive events that emerge from family narratives. Rather than focusing on problems, the aim is to explore resources, learning processes, and innovations, as well as the goals that families envision for themselves. As [Gergen and Warhus \(2003\)](#) argue, the so-called "miracle question" invites a dialogue oriented toward creating future realities rather than revisiting past problems. Making

visible the generative relationships developed by stepfamilies enriches knowledge about this family form and also contributes to transforming the traditional conceptions through which they have been understood, fostering recognition of the multiple ways of being and doing family in contemporary society.

3. Research Design and Methodological Approach

The present study adopted a qualitative, interpretive, and constructionist methodology. This approach was appropriate for understanding the experiences, meanings, and discourses that members of stepfamilies construct around their family organization and the generative family relationships they develop in their everyday lives. Reflective and open-ended conversational encounters were conducted individually with different family members (partners and children).

Drawing on constructionist contributions, these encounters were co-constructed in a dialogical manner through a collaborative process that granted shared protagonism to the participants. These individual conversations were characterized by horizontal relationships, mutual respect, active listening, and recognition of the other as a knowledgeable subject. To facilitate these conditions, strategies such as flexibility in conversation, recognition of each participant's pace, and the creation of a warm and trusting environment were adopted, allowing participants to freely express their family experiences without feeling evaluated.

3.1. Participants and Selection Strategies

The identification of participating families was initially carried out through the dissemination of the study within Social Work programs at universities in Colombia's Coffee-Growing Region. The aim was to access potential participants through students and faculty members. In these settings, the objectives of the study and its appreciative approach were presented, emphasizing the recognition of family experiences through which generative relationships had been developed. Particular emphasis was placed on the interest in collectively analyzing the resources, innovations, and strengths developed by families, avoiding a deficit-oriented perspective or one focused exclusively on challenges, a topic on which abundant research already exists. The nature of the invitation facilitated contact with families interested in discussing their stepfamily trajectories, the transformations they had experienced, and the learning processes developed throughout their family lives. This, in turn, encouraged the participation of individuals willing to share and reflect upon their experiences, providing diverse accounts of family reorganization processes and the construction of family bonds.

Once families interested in participating had been identified, the number of families and participants in each city was expanded through these initial contacts using the snowball sampling technique.

In total, 50² individuals from 25 stepfamilies participated in the study, including biological and stepparents as well as biological and stepchildren. The selection criteria were as follows: (1) the family had been constituted for at least three years, in order to ensure relatively consolidated relational trajectories; (2) one or both members of the couple had children from previous relationships, as this is a defining characteristic of this type of family organization; (3) there was an existing relationship and contact with these children, regardless of living arrangements, given that co-residence alone does not define the configuration of a stepfamily; (4) the family was not involved in ongoing legal or institutional proceedings related to its current dynamics, in order to avoid including situations of active crisis that might significantly shape participants' narratives; (5) family members resided in Colombia's Coffee-Growing Region (Caldas, Quindío, or Risaralda), in either urban or rural settings, as this was the territorial context defined for the study; and (6) participants expressed their willingness and consent to take part in the study and share their family experiences.

² We worked individually with each member of the various family groups. This decision was made, firstly, to minimize potential bias in responses during group conversations, due to the positions and roles each member occupies and recognizes within the family, and secondly, due to the difficulty of bringing everyone together at the same time. From this description, it is possible to get an idea of the volume of information gathered from all the families

Regarding the characteristics of the participating population, among the 25 family groups included in the study, 24 women participated as wives and 14 men as husbands. With respect to children, 8 women and 4 men participated. Seven families were from the municipality of Manizales, 14 from Armenia, and 4 from Pereira. In each family, efforts were made to include the participation of the couple and at least one biological child who was over 18 years of age. The inclusion of adult children responded to ethical and methodological considerations, as it allowed for their autonomous participation through direct informed consent without requiring authorization from legal guardians. However, this was not always possible, either because of participants' availability or because the children had not yet reached adulthood.

With regard to the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants, a wide diversity in the educational levels of the spouses was observed. While some had completed university degrees and even postgraduate studies, others had secondary education, technical training, or had not completed primary education. In terms of economic activity, most participants were employed, self-employed, or retired, although in some families women were exclusively engaged in domestic work.

Regarding the participating sons and daughters, most were pursuing university studies or had completed professional education and were engaged in paid employment. Both those who lived with their families and those who resided independently contributed, to varying degrees, to their own economic support or that of their households.

As general characteristics of the participating stepfamilies, the simple family type predominated, followed by complex families³. Most cases corresponded to matricentric families; therefore, patterns of co-residence occurred primarily between women's biological children and their stepparents or stepfathers. Likewise, seven families had children together within the new union, whereas in the remaining families, the family organization was configured through relationships originating from previous unions.

3.2. Data Collection, Interview Guide, and Procedure

Conversations with participating families were conducted through open-ended interviews, guided by a set of questions adapted to each participant. The interview guide addressed aspects related to the experience of living in a stepfamily, trajectories of stepfamily formation, dominant and alternative family discourses, and relationships considered generative within family life. Although a common set of themes was used with all participants, the questions were adapted according to whether participants were mothers, fathers, sons, or daughters, in order to understand their experiences from the different roles they occupied within the family organization. The guide was reviewed and refined during the first interviews conducted, allowing for adjustments in the wording of some questions and facilitating greater depth in participants' accounts.

Fieldwork was carried out in three stages. In the first stage, participation involved some members of the couple, primarily women in their roles as mothers and wives. In the second stage, adult sons and daughters were included. This decision was intended to facilitate scheduling and opportunities for participation, while avoiding difficulties related to obtaining permission from parents or legal guardians. In the third stage, men participated in their roles as husbands and fathers. It is important to note that, following each stage, a process of interview transcription and analysis was undertaken. Analyzing family narratives individually made it possible to construct a relational framework in which points of convergence, as well as particular conceptions, discourses, and ways of understanding life held by each family member, could be identified.

During this process, and with the prior authorization of the participating families, it was occasionally necessary to contact them again in order to expand upon or clarify certain accounts. This was done to complement the information obtained, avoid erroneous interpretations, and ensure a reading that was as faithful as possible to their experiences.

³. A simple family structure is one in which only one partner has children from a previous relationship; complex families are those in which both spouses bring children into the new union.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

During the meetings with the families, the ethical and confidential treatment that would be given to the shared information was clearly explained from the outset. Through the reading and discussion of the informed consent form, family members were informed about the academic objectives of the study, the intended use of the information, the confidentiality measures adopted, and the mechanisms established to protect their personal data.

Participation was voluntary, and participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences was guaranteed. Likewise, the identity of the families was protected through the anonymization of the information used during the analysis process and in the presentation of the findings.

3.4. Data Analysis Process and Criteria for Rigor

The process of systematizing and analyzing the information was carried out through a categorization and hermeneutic analysis process, supported by the Atlas.ti software. The analysis was conducted simultaneously with the fieldwork, which involved returning to some families at different points in time to expand upon or complement the information obtained. Through the transcription, refinement, and repeated reading of the conversational encounters, a process of familiarization with the family narratives was developed, making it possible to understand the particularities of each case and to identify similarities and differences among the participating families.

Subsequently, a process of coding and progressive category construction was carried out in accordance with the objectives of the study. Initially, the analysis was guided by categories derived from the conceptual framework; however, the examination of the narratives led to the expansion, reorganization, and creation of new emergent categories and subcategories. This process involved the continuous review of codes and the use of analytical memos to deepen the analysis and document the researcher's decisions and reflections. The consolidation of categories was guided by criteria of analytical saturation, understood as the point at which new narratives no longer contributed substantially different elements to the understanding of the phenomenon under study. Likewise, the participation of mothers, fathers, and children made it possible to contrast different perspectives on stepfamily experiences and family relationships, thereby strengthening the interpretive consistency of the findings.

4. Results

As previously noted, the findings presented here focus on the generative relationships developed by the participating stepfamilies. This does not imply denying the existence of tensions, disagreements, or conflicts -present in many of the stories shared- but rather highlighting how, despite these challenges, these families have been able to build strong, creative, and enduring emotional bonds. All participating families had already undergone several years of consolidation: most had been together for more than a decade, while the others had been established for five years or more. Although it is widely recognized that stepfamilies tend to have higher divorce rates than nuclear families, with the exception of six cases, the participating families were able to remain together over time and described how they had achieved this.

This section presents three pillars that illustrate the generativity and potentialities developed by the participating families:

- (a) family resources, expressed through the new couple relationship, stepfamily parenting, and the values and practices that have contributed to family cohesion;
- (b) creativity, innovation, and the construction of new experiences, evidenced in assertive relationships between parental figures, an active multiparental system, and collaborative family coping; and
- (c) collective learning, future visions, and achievements attained within the context of the new family configuration.

These pillars, together with their respective categories and subcategories, are summarized in the Table 1.

Table 1.

Summary of findings by category

Central category	Subcategories	Main finding
1. Family Resources	Couple Relationship	The new couple relationship is recognized as a source of support, companionship, affection, and stability. This is reflected in the maturity and experience acquired through previous relationships.
	Stepfamily parenting	Stepfamily parenting was constructed as a gradual process through relationships of presence and support that, in some cases, gave rise to quasi-kinship bonds, facilitated by mothers' mediation and by the reflexivity of stepparental figures regarding their role.
	Expansion of the Family Network	Stepfamily formation processes lead to the expansion of the family network, which is expressed through relationships of support and solidarity in practical, service-related, and economic matters. This extended family becomes particularly visible during important dates and events in the lives of children through companionship and participation in rituals of gathering and celebration.
	Relational Practices and Resources that Foster Family Cohesion	Family cohesion is strengthened through relational practices and resources such as dialogue, respect, the pursuit of family unity, and prayer as a spiritual resource.
2. Creativity and Relational Innovations	Stepparental Cooperation	Biological and stepparental figures develop cooperative relationships grounded in the recognition of children's extended family networks. These relationships are strengthened by the adults' maturity and by the positive value attributed to the bond developed with stepparental figures. The consolidation of an active multiparental system is supported by the establishment of functional relationships among the different parental figures. This involves recognizing and respecting parent-child relationships, building agreements regarding childrearing, defining parental functions, and sharing responsibility for the care, support, and guidance of children.
	Active Multiparental System	Stepparents provide forms of support and accompaniment that differ from those exercised by biological parents, contributing to children's well-being without disregarding existing parental bonds (supportive parenting without undermining biological parenthood). Depending on the situation, stepparents assume either a complementary or a substitutive role in relation to the biological parent (multifunctional or multifaceted parental figure).
	Collaborative Coping	Various family situations are addressed collaboratively, as reflected in decision-making processes, caregiving practices, and collective efforts.
3. Collective Lessons, Visions for the Future, and Family Achievements	Learning for Family Life and Relationships	Learning for family coexistence is reflected in relational strategies such as negotiation, yielding one's own viewpoints, and taking "time-out" periods to regain calm, all within a framework of mutual respect.
	Promoting Family Well-Being	Future visions and family achievements are oriented toward promoting the well-being of the family and its members and are shaped by the life stage each family is experiencing. Consequently, families with school-aged children tend to focus on contributing to their children's education, providing them with greater economic opportunities, and acquiring their own home. In contrast, families that have reached the empty-nest stage seek to enjoy life as a couple and to experience family life as a shared dream and family project.

Note: Prepared by the author.

4.1 Resources and Strengths in Stepfamilies

The potentialities identified by participating families regarding their family organization are:

Couple Relationship

The current couple relationship is one of the main strengths of stepfamilies. The aspects that characterize this relationship include complementarity, mutual support, companionship, understanding, affection, and maturity. It also involves accumulated experience, solidity, and the sense of security provided by the new partners. All these aspects are considered novelties in relation to previous relationships and are therefore positively valued by families:

“...All the decisions we have made in life have always been made by both of us, whether to achieve things, for work matters, or for decisions regarding the children (...) we are so different, and yet so, so compatible...” (Family 17, wife, personal communication, November 23, 2021)

Teamwork within new couple relationships is recognized as positive because it strengthens conjugal relations. Addressing everyday situations through these skills has allowed partners in stepfamilies to recognize each other's differences and strengths. Likewise, it has fostered mutual support and joint work toward the achievement of individual and/or family goals. In complementary conjugal relationships, each person contributes something that balances the other's burdens or weaknesses, while also offering mutual support expressed in the assistance each one needs.

The father of my children developed a disease over time (he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's), and he [referring to her current partner] was the person who was always attentive to my ex-husband's illness, he supported me throughout this process, picking up his medication, taking the medication to the place where he was... My son, now that his father has been deceased for two months, thanks him for everything he did for his father (...) (Family 16, wife, personal communication, November 25, 2021)

Receiving support from a partner is a valuable resource for families, especially in difficult moments. In stepfamilies, this support is expressed in various ways: in the upbringing and accompaniment of non-biological children, in the achievement of personal goals and aspirations, in the performance of daily tasks, and in coping with illness and crisis situations. Each of these forms of support represents a novel aspect of the current relationship, playing a crucial role in strengthening the bond and contributing to the consolidation of a conjugal relationship based on tranquility, reciprocity, and companionship:

“At this moment I live with a person with a lot of peace, a lot of tranquility; there is harmony, there is joy, there is laughter... We both support each other and at this stage of life we live with a lot of harmony and a lot of tranquility...” (Family 18, wife, personal communication, February 21, 2022)

One of the main changes observed in the conjugal relationships of stepfamilies is the greater serenity and stability experienced by the couple compared to their previous relationship. This harmony and tranquility within the family turn the home into a safe space that provides satisfaction and fulfillment for all its members. Positive couple relationships foster a family environment and dynamics that promote the well-being of children, as well as sibling and parent-child relationships, since the couple becomes the main relational model within the family.

The accounts highlight that companionship, emotional stability, and having someone to face life's difficulties with are aspects highly valued by the couple in the new family. These elements foster marital satisfaction and are largely attributed to the maturity and experience gained in previous relationships. They also reflect the commitment and affection present in the current conjugal relationship, which play a fundamental role in strengthening the bond and the quality of the relationship, as illustrated below:

“I feel that what is different is that relationship mediated by affection and an absolutely respectful treatment... He [referring to her current husband] is extremely affectionate with me, and that is the best thing for me; it keeps me in love...” (Family 5, wife, personal communication, February 24, 2023)

The maturity and accumulated experience of stepfamily members in relation to previous relationships are highlighted as a family resource, as they facilitate drawing on personal histories to address and cope more effectively with crises or everyday life situations. In addition, they demonstrate greater maturity in knowing what they want and seek in a relationship, which may support conflict resolution and awareness of the support networks they can access when needed. It could be argued that in contemporary couple relationships, love, commitment, and desire are prioritized, and the emotional and affective dimension gains greater relevance ([Palacio, 2020](#)), guiding decisions about with whom one chooses to share life.

Stepparenting

Another resource and strength highlighted by stepfamilies is stepparenting. The relationships established between non-biological children and their stepparents are positively valued, as they are perceived as close and affectionate, and because they contribute to the overall well-being of the family and to the development of children and adolescents. The main factors that have facilitated positive relationships between children and stepparents include the gradual construction of the relationship, the reflexivity of stepparents regarding their parental role within the family, and the mediating role of the biological father or mother. An example illustrating the warmth of the relationships between stepparents and stepchildren, as well as the gradual way in which the bond was constructed, is the following:

“At first I found it a bit difficult; I didn't know how to act because I don't have children, but as time went by I gradually stepped into that role of being a father in a certain way, and I got to know C [referring to his stepdaughter], what she liked and what she did not like, and the way I had to talk to her so that she would not feel uncomfortable. So, as time went by, the relationship has become much stronger. What I mainly value is respect. I know she liked it very much that I gave her space, that I never interfered in a negative way in her things; I tried to give her a lot of privacy and let her mother handle the rules, while I accompanied. She gradually came to see that, and it was something very positive.” (Family 14, husband, personal communication, April 13, 2024)

The consolidation of the bond between stepparents and stepchildren in stepfamilies occurred through a gradual process. This bond was progressively strengthened through everyday interaction and various strategies of rapprochement implemented by stepparental figures. Among these strategies are: (a) playful strategies, in which engagement through play and enjoyment was prioritized; (b) communicational strategies, where dialogue and conversation were central to fostering mutual understanding; (c) care strategies, providing the necessary attention to meet basic needs such as food; and (d) accompaniment strategies, offering support in daily activities and transportation, ensuring the pick-up and transfer of children according to their needs.

These actions, in turn, contributed to the strengthening and warmth of parent–child relationships. The factors that influenced the construction of close and affective bonds include affinity and shared interests, respectful treatment toward the biological mother or father and stepchildren, mutual knowledge, and the delegation of rules and authority to the biological parent. This positions the stepparental figure as a friendly adult who guides the children and supports their partner in key decisions regarding childrearing.

The couple, in turn, acts as a mediator in the difficulties that arise between their biological children and their new spouse, managing conflicts and facilitating their resolution. Mediation by biological parents also proved to be a key factor in fostering positive relationships in stepparenting, as it promotes understanding, empathy, and respect for different ways of being and understanding life. This generative practice facilitates the handling of conflicts and the effective management of differences through creativity and recognition of the other ([Fried Schnitman, 2008](#)). In this case, mediation systems -led by biological fathers and mothers-

require capacities for listening, coordination, recognition of what is possible, and the implementation of actions that benefit all family members:

“I have always acted as a mediator, and I think one remains a permanent mediator. So, when something happened I would always tell him [referring to her new partner], you need to be patient because she is a teenager; or on the contrary, I would tell her [referring to her biological daughter], you need to be patient, you know he is an older man, so I would talk to them about respecting each other's ways of thinking (...)” (Family 1, wife, personal communication, November 21, 2021)

The guidance provided to biological children and to the partner by the mediating parental figure reveals the existence of tensions within the stepfamily parent–child network. However, it also shows the actions that families themselves implement to address conflicts and prevent their escalation.

In this context, in addition to the negotiating role predominantly assumed by mothers, the receptiveness of the parties involved and the willingness of stepparents to empathize with their stepchildren are also highlighted. These stepparents are further characterized by their reflexivity regarding the construction of their parental role, which lacks clear guidelines and must be developed in accordance with the specific dynamics and needs of each family.

Reflexivity in stepparenting is expressed in the recognition of mistakes and in the motivation to change in order to improve the relationship with their children:

“At some point I experienced episodes of anger with him [referring to his stepchild], but I would stop and say, this cannot be because I lived it myself, so I changed; I try every day to improve. I say this was wrong, I will change it, I talk a lot with him, I ask him to forgive me, I try to do things better, and we have an excellent relationship (...)” (Family 13, husband, personal communication, February 7, 2024)

The ability to reflect on one's own actions and make timely adjustments in behavior is an aspect that fosters close relationships in stepparenting. In fact, many children view their stepparental figures with such closeness that they perceive them almost as their own parents. Likewise, these parental figures regard and assume them as if they were their own children:

“I have no blood or kinship ties with C [referring to his stepfather]. But I do consider him as if he were my father (...) when I see C at home, I do not see him as a visitor or a stranger; I see him as that father figure” (Family 15, son, personal communication, March 11, 2024)

“My husband has her saved in his phone contacts as ‘daughter’, and my daughter says ‘I have two dads’, so on Father's Day she celebrates both of them, and even though she does not call my husband ‘dad’, she sees him as a father figure.” (Family 22, wife, personal communication, May 23, 2023)

The recognition of stepchildren toward the stepparental figure as if they were their own mother or father reflects the close bond that has been constructed between them.

Quasi-kinship is also reflected in how parents describe the relationship between their new partners and their stepchildren. They often note that these relationships have been established with such closeness that their spouses appear to assume the children “as if they were their own.” This is because they have consistently taken an active role in accompanying their upbringing and care.

Expansion of the Family Network

One of the characteristics of stepfamilies is their capacity to expand and form new family ties through the connections brought by different family members. The expansion of family networks becomes a valuable

resource and a protective factor, as it provides support and solidarity in economic, practical, and emotional matters. In addition, this expanded network offers opportunities that were not available within the previous family structure:

“He [referring to her stepfather] found a way to integrate us with his family, with his parents, his siblings (...) that is something worth highlighting because, let’s say, we were on our own and finding another family, to which you feel you belong, is beautiful... When the pandemic situation came, his brother sent us groceries, sent us money, and was also there supporting us.” (Family 12, daughter, personal communication, April 20, 2023)

The support provided by expanded networks becomes activated in times of need, during crises, or in significant life events. This support may include material and service assistance, expressed through the satisfaction of basic needs, academic support, guidance, and advice. Therefore, having a strengthened network provides security and the backing of someone close in situations that require it. The extended and enlarged family operates as a network that offers assistance to the stepfamily organization and becomes a resource through which individuals experience protection and social companionship. These expanded family networks foster shared experiences and the celebration of important events through rituals and special gatherings:

“Over the years we said, why don’t we all celebrate together? We did not see it as wrong (...) Bringing these two families together was initially tense, the atmosphere was somewhat heavy, but over time it became a habit and we would gather to celebrate, and there was always a lot of respect. That respect strengthened love, to the point that my mother and I, my stepmother, ended up becoming friends, they ended up sharing their stories... for me, all of that was what helped them heal, understand each other, and reach an acceptance that is obviously not easy.” (Family 8, daughter, personal communication, April 18, 2023)

“When S [her stepchild] graduated from university, we were all there. I remember that when we left the ceremony I approached S’s mother, my partner’s ex-wife, and told her that I congratulated her, and she replied: thank you very much, this is a shared achievement. At the beginning it was a very tense relationship, but little by little things became clearer and others matured.” (Family 3, wife, personal communication, December 11, 2021)

Celebrations of special dates, whether for children or for parents, as well as various family plans, serve as occasions for stepfamilies to come together, share time, and express interest in family members.

Relational Practices and Resources that Foster Cohesion

In stepfamilies, the resources considered fundamental for family cohesion and satisfaction are dialogue, respect, and solidarity, expressed through unity and support. In addition, prayer is seen as an important practice, as God is understood as the center and foundation of family decision-making. These elements represent internal resources and strengths that stepfamilies use to resolve conflicts and improve family dynamics:

“Well, God in the family, I think that is the most important thing (...) God is always very present; for example, the values, the things you are taught in church about how family should be treated, respect, are always very present, and in any difficulty we have, what we say is let’s pray to God.” (Family 14, daughter, personal communication, April 17, 2023)

For families, faith in God is understood as a daily practice expressed through prayer and communication with a higher being. In these practices, various intentions are requested, and gratitude is expressed for received opportunities. Spirituality strengthens family relationships and provides the calm and strength needed to face life’s difficulties.

God is considered the center and guiding axis of the family, offering direction and guidance in people's actions. Through His word, families find orientation and a set of values that they put into practice in their family environment, such as respect, dialogue, solidarity, and love for others. These values form the basis of family relationships in stepfamilies and, in turn, become resources that help them face and overcome various situations:

"Our family has remained together because we have been respectful in every aspect. I believe we have respected each other's spaces..." (Family 15, husband, personal communication, March 5, 2024)

"Faith, prayer, and being together in difficult times are a great strength for us. We have the ability to support one another and overcome difficulties together... a capacity to readjust collectively in order to respond to adversity..." (Family 17, wife, personal communication, November 23, 2021)

"Our greatest strength is unity. That is what has characterized us the most, because whenever one of us has a problem, the others are always attentive." (Family 9, husband, personal communication, April 5, 2024)

Respecting each family member's personal space, openly communicating to resolve conflicts and express discomforts, as well as maintaining family unity in difficult moments through mutual support, are resources that significantly contribute to the overall well-being of families and strengthen their relationships. These family resources are activated autonomously in response to the various situations that arise throughout their family trajectories.

Stepfamilies face specific challenges, such as the construction of stepparenting, the management of relationships with non-cohabiting parents, and the consolidation of boundaries, limits, and their own family identity. All of these aspects test their capacity to face adversity, generally without the support of third parties, relying on accumulated experience and the resources they have developed over time. The mobilization of resources occurs through their own expert voice.

4. 2. Creativity, Innovation, and The Development of New Family Experiences

The innovative experiences that participating families have developed to face their everyday challenges are:

Parental Cooperation. Extended Family Approach

The collaborative relationship among parental figures has been an innovative experience lived by stepfamilies, contributing to the expansion of their family boundaries and making more visible the broad networks of relationships among their members. Interactions with clear boundaries between parents and their partners are established as a strategy that facilitates children's lives, as it recognizes the existence of other significant people in their lives and creates a favorable environment for them to interact and share freely:

"...Both my mother and father were always extremely flexible in respecting each other's families and how they had reorganized their family. I could feel at ease with everyone, without disturbing anyone and without that generating jealousy or anger." (Family 1, daughter, personal communication, April 25, 2023)

This situation provides a harmonious environment for children who must alternate between different families, while also avoiding loyalty conflicts with their parents, who accept the new dynamics and organizational structure of the extended family to which their children belong. In some cases, the relationship between parental figures goes beyond mere acceptance, reaching a level of assertiveness that facilitates contact and interaction among them and prevents the development of hostile relationships:

“From time to time we include my daughter’s father in our plans and the four of us go out together. For many people this is something unusual, but we get along well...” (Family 14, wife, personal communication, November 11, 2021)

The collaborative relationship among parental figures has, at times, allowed them to share everyday life and various moments of family gathering and celebration as an extended family.

Assertive relationships among parental figures have been consolidated through the parents’ gratitude for what stepparents provide to their children in their absence. Likewise, this consolidation is related to the recognition of the passage of time, and to the maturity and clarity now held regarding the situation experienced by the couple, the children, and the family. Biological and stepparents are aware of the bonds that children build, and therefore establish expanded family boundaries that allow them to share in a peaceful manner.

Active Multiparental System

The relationships described above allow for the establishment of an active multiparental system in stepfamilies, in which adults responsible for children—whether biologically or through affinity—are present in their lives, fulfilling sometimes differentiated roles of care and upbringing. For the multiparental system to be activated in families, it is not necessary for assertive connections to be established between parental figures, as described in the previous section; it is sufficient that cooperative or minimally functional relationships exist among adults.

Functional or cooperative relationships that support the multiparental system are established to address matters related to children, such as the construction of agreements between biological and stepparents regarding parental relationships, the definition of boundaries and roles for each adult, the coordination of time and place for interaction with non-cohabiting parents, the determination of child support, financial assistance, and accompaniment during illness or other difficulties experienced by the children:

“F [referring to his stepfather] was always very respectful, and although he was always attentive, he was never judgmental; he always acted and has always been a very neutral person, so he would always support and be present, accompanying my mother...” (Family 22, daughter, personal communication, April 4, 2024)

Parental figures who assume a role of support and accompaniment are recognized as a complement to the upbringing of stepchildren. This accompaniment avoids duplication of functions with biological parents, which prevents the intrusion of roles and favors clarity in the establishment of parental boundaries. The companionship offered by stepparents is reflected in advice, recognition of the biological parents’ authority, and the consolidation of close and friendly relationships with children.

Multiparentality is strengthened through this form of parental role, insofar as the functions performed by stepparents do not interfere with those carried out by biological parents, allowing all adults responsible for children to be recognized from the different positions they occupy within the family and parental system.

A similar situation occurs in stepfamily configurations in which stepparental roles sometimes shift toward a multifaceted or multifunctional logic. In these cases, there is also no interference or duplication of functions performed by biological parents, as parental roles are assumed flexibly, either through a logic of accompaniment or, alternatively, through a logic of substitution. That is, in some instances they provide support to biological parents in their caregiving tasks, while in others they replace or take over those responsibilities when they are not fulfilled. An example of this combination of roles is illustrated in the following excerpt:

“They have their father and maintain a relationship with him... but sometimes they seek support from me when he cannot...” (Family 5, husband, personal communication, July 5, 2023)

Stepparental figures who oscillate between a supportive role and a multifaceted or multifunctional role replace only those tasks that biological parents are unable to fulfill; in other cases, they provide support. In all these situations, families are aware of the existence and role of the biological father in the children's lives; however, when various needs are not met, a response is activated by the new partners, which at times leads them to shift from support to substitution of the biological parental figure.

This aspect is innovative, as it shows the versatility of stepparental figures in constructing roles that are not clearly delimited but respond to the needs of new families. Likewise, it enables the recognition, by children, of an active multiparental system in which each adult fulfills parental functions at different levels and intensities.

Collaborative Coping

Collaborative coping is a dynamic process that emerges as a response to situations of adversity. It is considered a coordinated action that involves working together, listening to others, making decisions, clarifying intentions, and collectively contributing to the resolution of challenges that arise ([Fried Schnitman, 2011b](#)). It is highlighted as a novel and creative family experience that stepfamilies construct to face everyday conflicts. These experiences are materialized in collective decision-making and family care:

“Decisions are made by mutual agreement; we do not like to impose anything on the other from a single point of view...” (Family 1, husband, personal communication, January 27, 2024)

“Our greatest strength is that capacity to collectively face difficulties and respond to them; we all help and support each other...” (Family 17, wife, personal communication, November 23, 2021)

Collaborative coping and joint decision-making stand out as aspects that stepfamilies mobilize and value positively within their organization. Considering each member's opinion and contribution in matters of collective interest becomes an innovative practice that not only facilitates family dynamics and relationships but also helps overcome difficulties and achieve shared goals.

As reflected in the accounts, conversation and dialogue among participants are fundamental means for enabling decision-making and collaborative coping.

Care is another aspect to highlight. In situations of vulnerability affecting any family member, support is activated—whether in the form of services or emotional reinforcement—that allows for attending to, accompanying, sustaining, or protecting individuals under conditions of family adversity. In these cases, care emerges as a relational response that implies commitment, presence, and co-responsibility:

“It is a family where we take great care of each other (...) if something happens to one of us, immediately everyone is attentive, taking care of and supporting each other in health-related matters...” (Family 14, daughter, personal communication, April 18, 2023)

Collective care, in which each member contributes according to their possibilities, also functions as a coping strategy in the face of everyday and structural challenges experienced by families.

4.3. Future Visions, Collective Learning, and Family Achievements

In generative relationships, learning processes, collective achievements, and future visions become relevant because they indicate that individuals have acquired knowledge derived from their experiences, have identified and achieved goals, aspirations, or plans as a group, and hold future projections that imply a shared sense of direction in which all members contribute to the construction and accomplishment of objectives.

Collective Learning

The learning processes recognized by stepfamilies as part of their trajectory refer to the acquisition of knowledge for family coexistence and relationships:

“Learning to compromise. I cannot insist on my own idea about a specific issue... because that would generate conflict; we would not understand each other, so one has to learn to give in a little. But that is not easy and requires effort from everyone (...)” (Family 6, husband, personal communication, February 4, 2022)

The learning processes for family life expressed by participants relate to skills for improving family relationships, such as patience, trust, compromise, and negotiation, as well as strategies for managing conflict, such as “time-out” practices.

All these skills are realized through conversation and dialogue. Recognizing dialogue as a fundamental learning process for family life opens new possibilities for relating to others, allowing members to understand what others think, feel, and how they perceive life.

These learning processes are particularly important for stepfamilies, as they enhance internal dynamics, interactions, and the effective management of family problems and difficulties. Likewise, they can be considered potentialities that, when collectively and simultaneously developed, support the construction of future visions for the family according to their own interests and objectives.

Regarding future visions and family achievements identified in stepfamilies, emphasis is placed on supporting the growth and development of the family:

“Everyone’s dream is to raise the girls [referring to both partners’ daughters]” (Family 20, wife, personal communication, December 12, 2022)

“The idea is to enjoy life, enjoying each other...” (Family 5, husband, personal communication, July 5, 2023)

Future projections and family achievements are closely related to the family’s life stage. That is, stepfamily organizations that are in the early stages of formation and childrearing tend to aspire to owning a home, improving their economic conditions, and supporting their children’s education and development into professionals and responsible adults. The desire to have their own place to live emerged as a strongly desired aspiration.

Family achievements, in turn, refer to remaining united in adversity and maintaining good relationships. Conversely, families in which the couple is already living alone because children have left the household tend to envision enjoying life as a couple and family tranquility. Their achievements are also associated with consolidating assets and successfully raising their children.

Focusing on and envisioning the family as a collective toward the future offers the possibility of constructing and achieving family goals, advancing in the search for and creation of alternatives to fulfill shared dreams. These visions and aspirations foster cohesion and stability and act as a source of motivation that guides both individual and collective actions. Moreover, they serve as a driving force for recognizing the importance of expanding family resources and capacities to face adversity.

5. Discussion

Approaching stepfamilies from a positive perspective that considers their possibilities allows them to be recognized as diverse family organizations with their own dynamics and family identities, rather than as structures that merely imitate the nuclear family ([Visher and Visher, 1988](#)). These are complex family forms

that integrate expanded relationships and develop diverse innovations to address everyday challenges. For this reason, an increasing body of literature calls for the recognition of what works within them, in order to understand these families in a more comprehensive way, as well as to prevent and mitigate their difficulties ([Ganong, Coleman and Sanner, 2025](#); [Jensen, 2025](#)).

Hence the importance of highlighting their family generativity and adopting an appreciative perspective in which the focus is not placed on challenges, but on the capacities, creativity, resources, and strengths that these families construct in their everyday dynamics and in the way they face adverse situations ([Visser and Visser, 1988](#); [Baeza, 2005](#); [Rivas, 2008](#); [Berger, 2006](#)).

In contrast to findings reported in recent studies ([Santos et al., 2024](#); [Scholtz and Spies, 2023](#); [Jensen, 2022](#); [Cui, Li and Nyman, 2024](#)), which emphasize the challenges and opportunities of this family organization in specific areas- [Santos et al. \(2024\)](#) analyze post-divorce marital adjustment; [Scholtz and Spies \(2023\)](#) focus on stepmothers; [Jensen \(2022\)](#) examines relationships between children and stepparental figures; and [Cui et al. \(2024\)](#) study the impact of stepfathers on adolescent well-being- this study proposes, as its original contribution, a broader perspective on stepfamilies that recognizes their relational and generative potential as an aspect worth highlighting in all families, regardless of the difficulties or problems they face. Similarly, the findings show several convergences. In the domain of family resources, marital satisfaction in stepfamilies is largely shaped by the maturity and accumulated experience of partners in previous relationships. These experiences allow them to draw on prior learning to face the challenges of the new relationship and to more clearly identify available sources of support when needed ([Martínez-Monteagudo, Estévez, and Inglés, 2013](#); [Baeza, 2005](#); [Rivas, 2008](#)).

Regarding stepparenting, the findings are consistent with [Jociles and Villaamil \(2008a\)](#), showing that in cases where a substitution-based form of parenting is not exercised, relationships between stepparents and children are facilitated. In this sense, delegating disciplinary management to biological parents -at least while trust and closeness are being built ([Pylyser, Buysse, and Loeys., 2018](#)) -helps minimize conflicts and fosters the creation of “satisfactory affective relationships” ([Andolfi, 2003, p. 93](#)).

The findings also align with [Madrid-Salas, Rodríguez-López, and Pérez-Redondo \(2024\)](#), who argue that the lack of prior preparation of children is a determining factor in family conflict; thus, acceptance and trust within the parent-child subsystem are gradually constructed over time and cohabitation.

Likewise, it was found that the reflexive nature with which stepparents construct their roles is related to the absence of clear social guidelines for their exercise ([Cherlin, 1979](#)). As a result, stepparenting tends to be situated and configured in accordance with the dynamics, needs, and expectations of each family.

Finally, positive relationships constructed within stepparenting favor children recognizing stepparental figures as if they were a mother or father. This finding resonates with the notions of quasi-kinship developed by [Rivas \(2008\)](#) and [Jociles and Villaamil \(2008b\)](#), which show that although there is still a tendency to consider biological ties as the main criterion for defining a “real parent,” family narratives also recognize the existence of figures who, without replacing the biological parent, perform similar or complementary functions in children’s everyday lives.

Regarding family network expansion, it was found that expanded family networks “extend beyond the physical boundaries of the household” ([Palacio, 2020, p. 34](#)), as they are part of meaningful ties that extend across separate, multisited, and glocal households ([Palacio, 2020](#)). This characteristic fosters experiences, rituals, and family gatherings that sustain relationships beyond daily cohabitation. In this sense, celebrations of meaningful moments in children’s lives, as noted by [Fang, Poortman, and van der Lippe \(2022\)](#), help make visible the expansion of the family and the relational networks surrounding the stepfamily organization. The expansion of these networks not only provides resources to cope with adversity, but also opportunities to share, accompany, and celebrate family life. Moreover, relationships

within these networks tend to strengthen over time as familiarity, closeness, and trust develop among members. Therefore, gatherings, rituals, and traditions linked to everyday life play a fundamental role in strengthening family bonds ([Satir, 1988](#)).

Regarding relational practices and resources that foster family cohesion, it was found, in line with [Sánchez-Jiménez \(2020\)](#), that spiritual refuge constitutes a space that provides calm, security, and hope in difficult situations. From this perspective, turning to God in moments of uncertainty or suffering allows families to face adversity with greater serenity, by finding a symbolic source of support that helps reduce distress and give meaning to lived experiences.

Regarding relational innovations, cooperation between parental figures fosters the construction of an extended family approach ([Svare, Jay, and; Mason, 2004](#)). However, this type of relationship is often subject to social and familial pressures, given the persistent belief that ex-partners should not maintain close or collaborative ties after separation. Nevertheless, the findings show that parental couples who manage to fulfill agreements and build cooperative, assertive, or functional relationships succeed in differentiating the conjugal relationship from the parental one ([Estrada-Iguíniz, 2015](#)). This differentiation supports the consolidation of multiparental systems in which several mothers and fathers actively participate in children's care, support, and well-being.

The activation of a multiparental system in stepfamilies, according to LeGall and Martin (1993, cited in [Saint-Jacques, 2009](#)), is shaped by different logics or modalities for regulating parental roles assumed by stepparents. In this line, [Jociles and Villaamil \(2008b\)](#) propose that stepfamilies operate through logics of substitution, continuity, exclusion, and status quo. However, the findings of this study suggest that these modalities do not exhaust the contemporary forms of parental organization identified in participating families. Specifically, two additional logics were identified: one oriented toward support and accompaniment, differentiated from that provided by biological parents, and another related to the consolidation of a multifaceted or multifunctional stepparental figure, capable of assuming support or substitution roles depending on family needs and circumstances. These modalities broaden the analytical possibilities for understanding stepparenting and reveal flexible forms of role construction.

In both cases, these configurations increase opportunities for assistance, support, and care for children through the articulated participation of biological parents and stepparents. This reflects the diversity and complexity with which family relationships are constructed in stepfamily contexts. In this regard, it aligns with [Fernández-Rasines and Bogino \(2016\)](#), who argue that stepfamilies become innovative and generative when they embrace the addition of parental figures rather than the replacement of some by others.

Regarding collaborative coping, [Fried Schnitman \(2011b\)](#) states that conflicts, crises, and various family situations test members' capacity to act in a coordinated manner. This process leads to the joint construction of alternatives, ideas, and new possibilities for successfully addressing difficulties.

Consistent with this, in participating families, coordination and cooperation among members -regardless of age or role- proved essential for managing complex situations and making collective decisions. Likewise, close relationships and prior experiences of unity and family support facilitated joint action beyond individual interests, a point also emphasized by [Fried Schnitman \(2011b\)](#) as a condition for collaborative responses. Revisiting these findings is relevant because it highlights the capacity of stepfamilies to overcome difficulties through collectively constructed relational resources. From this perspective, problems are no longer understood as individual issues but as relational dynamics embedded in support networks that participate in their construction and resolution. In line with [McNamee \(2001\)](#) and [Gergen \(2007\)](#), the focus shifts toward what happens between people rather than exclusively on individual characteristics.

In relation to collaborative coping, another relevant finding was complementary, participatory, and "intra- and intergenerational" care ([Palacio, 2020, p. 143](#)), in which each family member contributes according to

their possibilities. This form of care functions as a coping strategy in the face of everyday and structural challenges, while also enabling collective responses to adversity.

Consistent with [Palacio \(2020\)](#), shared, reciprocal, and negotiated family care is essential for addressing health-related matters, household tasks, and members' well-being. It also contributes to the democratization of family relations and gradually helps overcome historically gendered inequalities that have disproportionately affected women. From this perspective, care is understood as a shared social responsibility and a human condition that requires interdependence to sustain life.

The findings suggest that these practices not only redistribute family burdens but also strengthen resilience and enhance collaborative responses to adversity. Such aspects invite placing care at the center of social life, recognizing that all individuals require care at different moments in life and, at the same time, are capable of providing it. In this sense, family remains one of the main spaces for learning and practicing care. This centrality of care becomes even more meaningful when understood as a strategy of collaborative family coping that sustains, protects, and democratizes relationships in contexts of vulnerability.

Finally, regarding collaborative learning, [Gergen \(2015\)](#) argues that human beings construct meanings and understandings through relational processes. Everyday actions emerge within joint constructions, highlighting the relevance of generative relational processes, as they make visible what people can achieve together.

In line with this, the study found that families collectively construct various strategies for family interaction, including negotiation, willingness to yield one's own ideas, and the establishment of pause periods to regain calm in moments of tension, all within a framework of mutual respect. These learning processes show that family coexistence depends not only on emotional bonds but also on relational capacities that develop and strengthen over time.

This relates to what [McNamee \(2001\)](#) calls relational sensitivity, understood as the willingness to recognize and respect perspectives different from one's own. As [Gergen \(2015\)](#) notes, living together implies accepting that not everyone shares the same worldview, an aspect particularly relevant in complex family organizations such as stepfamilies.

Finally, regarding achievements and future visions, owning a home emerges as one of the most significant projects for participating families. This finding aligns with [Palacio \(2020\)](#), who highlights the importance of having a dwelling that provides safety and protection from the external world. Beyond its material dimension, the home acquires symbolic value as a collectively built project and a place of belonging for all its members. In this sense, home becomes a reference point that consolidates family unity, as it symbolizes the achievement of a shared goal. It also fosters the construction of a shared space where both family lineages can coexist, an aspect identified by [Clément and Bonvalet \(2005\)](#) as fundamental for consolidating bonds in recomposed family contexts.

Finally, the findings contribute to expanding theoretical understanding of contemporary family life and offer relevant insights for professionals working in social intervention in family studies. Recognizing the resources, innovations, and learning processes constructed by participating families can help make visible their generative potential, regardless of the difficulties and tensions inherent in family dynamics. This is important because, without denying the challenges inherent in stepfamily organization, it is possible to shift the focus from problems to opportunities and to work from there, strengthening them.

Recognizing, from the experience of participating families, what has worked in their relational dynamics may serve as a guide for other families facing similar situations, enabling them to enhance their collective resources to cope with adversity. This, in turn, allows families to be seen as agents and protagonists of their own processes, as those who know their situation and lives better than anyone else, and therefore possess

tools to face difficulties and move forward. In these cases, professionals, through intervention, can engage in dialogical and collaborative conversations in which families are the main protagonists ([Anderson, 2012](#)). Similarly, for future research, it is recommended to continue from a generative perspective, highlighting the collective strategies that families develop to address everyday situations, with a focus on their capacities. It would also be important to work with families in different cultural contexts and with groups that, despite experiencing family difficulties, are able to recognize, from their own dynamics, the generativity they construct to face problems collaboratively.

Finally, it is necessary to acknowledge some limitations of the study. The participation of families was voluntary, and recruitment was conducted from an appreciative approach aimed at exploring family resources, innovations, and learning processes. This may have favored the participation of families more willing to reflect on positive aspects of their stepfamily trajectories, potentially resulting in underrepresentation of experiences marked by intense conflict or crisis. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted in relation to the characteristics of the sample and the study's aim of understanding generative processes constructed by participating families.

6. Conclusion

This study showed that the generativity of stepfamilies is expressed through the couple relationship, blended parenting, and the expansion of the family network. It is also expressed in the creativity and innovation with which they face everyday challenges, through collaborative coping, the establishment of assertive relationships between parental figures, and the learning processes for family relationships that they have developed through their experiences. These aspects evidence families' capacity to mobilize their own resources, consolidate meaningful bonds, and build collective responses to the demands of everyday life.

The findings allow us to understand that these families are not defined only by the tensions or challenges they face. On the contrary, they show that they have resources, innovations, and family learnings that support their well-being. In this sense, the generative experiences identified in stepfamilies challenge discourses that position the traditional nuclear family as an ideal model and open space for the recognition of family diversity, expressed in the multiple forms of organization that coexist today.

Understanding these generative relationships provides elements for the design of public policies that are consistent with family diversity and contributes to expanding knowledge on a topic that is still underexplored in the academic literature. Moreover, as this is a study conducted in Latin America, it provides situated evidence on a reality that has been mainly studied in Anglo-Saxon and Francophone contexts, with less presence of Spanish-language contributions, and even fewer studies on blended families in Colombia.

However, it is important to emphasize that the conclusions drawn from this study correspond to a specific reality in a particular context and should therefore be considered within their own limitations. First, this research did not include the voices of children, nor of biological children born within the new union, nor of professionals who have accompanied intervention processes with these families. In this regard, it would be valuable to include them in future studies in order to enrich the understanding of family generativity from their perspectives.

Second, most of the participating stepfamilies were matricentric; that is, the children who joined the new family mainly came from the mother's side. It would therefore be relevant to develop future research with a more balanced representation in terms of the gender of the parent contributing children.

Finally, it would be useful for future research to include populations living in rural areas and with diverse cultural and contextual backgrounds, in order to broaden the range of family groups studied and recognize the different ways in which family generativity is experienced in such settings.

About the author

Ana María Gil-Ríos

Professor at the Universidad del Quindío, Armenia, Colombia. Ph.D. in Family Studies, Universidad de Caldas, Colombia
amgil@uniquindio.edu.co <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6507-0195>

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