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# Insiders and outsiders in stepfamilies: Adults' and children's views on family boundaries

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## Abstract

This study examines descriptions of families after separation and re-partnering, with a focus on family boundaries between those considered family and those excluded from it. Adults in stepfamilies may try to maintain a large number of family ties originating from various partnerships, or they may limit the recognition of their family to the members of their new household. Children, on the other hand, are encouraged to maintain contact with both parents and their relatives. Family descriptions of 48 re-partnered mothers residing in Switzerland, as well as their current partners and children, are analysed by focusing on exclusiveness and inclusiveness in written or drawn descriptions. Descriptions collected in family interviews follow a balance of social tensions among interdependent individuals by which responses of children usually match those of their mothers. Mothers' responses show a high level of exclusiveness, whereas responses of mothers' partners and children are more balanced between exclusivity and inclusivity. Inclusiveness in families after re-partnering is also connected to conditions such as family structure, mothers' education and employment.

## Keywords

Configurational perspective, exclusiveness, family boundary, inclusiveness, stepfamily

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## Introduction

New conceptualizations suggested for studying families, like intimacy, relatedness, or personal life (e.g. May, 2011; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Smart, 2007), have shifted the focus from family as a bounded group of people with predetermined positions and a straightforward collective identification as a 'we' to more varied configurations of relationships considered personally significant. Contemporary family ties cross social expectations of heteronormativity or institutionalization of partnerships, and they are increasingly based on individuals' feelings of intimacy and on commitments that individuals subjectively choose (e.g. Weeks, 2007). There is a growing emphasis in research on the different family configurations that serve as alternatives to bounded family units defined by marriage and household membership (e.g. Budgeon and Roseneil, 2004; Widmer, 2010; Widmer and Jallinoja, 2008). The ways in which these configurations embody mechanisms of exclusion or inclusion – understandings of 'we' versus 'they' – have received less attention.

This study examines the understandings of family in situations following separation and re-partnering. It focuses on exclusiveness and inclusiveness as practices by which individuals differentiate between those considered insiders and outsiders in the family. The prevalence of separation and re-partnering in contemporary societies has contributed to the loosening of household-based family boundaries when, for example, a child's parental relationships include two households (Ihinger-Tallman, 1988). Loose boundaries enhance children's agency in defining their significant family (e.g. Alanen, 1992), and flexible boundaries may also relate to the extent to which non-residential parents continue their involvement in the upbringing of their children, something considered beneficial for children's development (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 2002; McHale, 2007). The idea of family boundaries reflects inclusion and exclusion, but it also allows for differing degrees of 'flexibility' in boundary construction (Allan et al., 2011). However, it is not clear whether stepfamilies in general maintain flexible family boundaries, or whether adults and children in a stepfamily see the family in the same way (Furstenberg and Nord, 1985; Stewart, 2005).

Based on qualitative data drawn from research on stepfamilies in Geneva, Switzerland, we examine how interdependent adults and children define their family boundaries. The extent to which separated and re-partnered individuals try to maintain family ties originating from various partnerships differs. Some limit family practices and the recognition of their family to the members of the new household and disregard the significance of previous partners or in-laws. We refer to these practices as exclusiveness. Others quite distinctly aim to maintain or even further develop such ties and apply more inclusive practices. Including people in the family realm illustrates a process of social integration and formation of an in-group, and the boundary drawn around a group of people distinguishes insiders from outsiders.

Exclusiveness of a nuclear family isolated from wider kin was written into Parsons' (1943) influential account emphasizing the conjugal unit as the nucleus around which family was formed. Drawing from the idea of a family as a self-contained and clearly bounded unit of two parents with children, in the context of the nuclear family, exclusiveness has been closely linked to heterosexuality and to a limited number of positions

in a family: there can only be one mother and one father. In addition, exclusiveness points to a family unit that is autonomous in matters concerning its members (Bartlett, 1984; Castrén and Högbäck, 2014; Young, 1998). Inclusiveness, on the other hand, refers to more permeable borders around family and to the coexistence of parallel family positions due to re-partnering of a child's parents, for example. Apart from biological parents, a child in a stepfamily configuration can have two additional parental figures (Castrén and Högbäck, 2014).

We are interested in the extent to which changing family relationships following separation and re-partnering organize into configurations giving rise to identification to a whole, to a 'we'. For Cooley (1929 [1909]), identification with a 'we' was critical in giving rise to moral ideas indispensable for group maintenance and development. However, as in all human processes, in building family 'we-ness', individuals are constrained by their interdependencies and subjected to a balance of social tensions, related with power differentials existing among them (Elias, 1978). Especially in relationships between adults and children, power is distributed unevenly and adults and children are differently positioned in the process of building or maintaining family boundaries, children being at least to some extent dependent on adults' views.

We focus on the process by which family identities are constructed in a balance of power among individuals with partly contradicting goals. By looking – side by side – at adults' and children's identification to a whole, their views on family boundaries, and whether these views are congruent with each other, we aim to discern conditions in which adults and children develop exclusive understandings of family and, respectively, those in which more permeable boundaries prevail. Research has found flexibility regarding boundaries favourable for successful stepfamilies (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Golish, 2003; Walker and Messinger, 1979) and beneficial for children (Furstenberg and Nord, 1985; Taanila et al., 2002), but situations of high conflict between ex-partners in continuing contact required by joint post-separation parenthood has been shown to be demanding for both adults and children (Smart and Neale, 1999).

The idea of family boundaries is particularly helpful for analysing the balance of social tensions (Elias, 1978) and structural dynamics of stepfamilies where patterns of belonging and commitment are more complex than in first-time families (Allan et al., 2011). Our aim is to analyse 'we-ness' as a relational process partly revealed in family descriptions made in a public setting by mothers, their new partners and their children. We then combine the qualitative investigation of these descriptions with various structural measures.

## **Inclusivity and family boundaries**

The question of who are insiders and who outsiders in stepfamilies has received attention in studies focusing on one family member's perspective (e.g. Braithwaite et al., 2001; Church, 1999; Larsson Sjöberg, 2000; Smart et al., 2001), whereas studies taking into account the views of several interdependent individuals are rare (see Golish, 2003 on stepfamily communication strategies). For instance, Church (1999) delineated five kinship models based on stepmothers' views about their family: nuclear, extended, couple, biological and no-family. Stepmothers in the couple family model, for example, focused primarily

on their relationship with their partner and considered relationships with their stepchildren as secondary, while those in the biological model focused on the parent–child relationship and did not necessarily include even their partners in their family (Church, 1999). In the studies of Larsson Sjöberg (2000) and Smart et al. (2001), most interviewed children included both biological parents in the family regardless of the time spent with them, whereas relationships with a biological parent's new partner had a more contingent quality. Recognition of blood and legal ties as the basic structural components of family life was shown to be one of the most consistent patterns in children's accounts (Smart et al., 2001).

This study differs from the existing literature in that it analyses descriptions of several family members interviewed together, and combines the investigation of descriptions with a set of social conditions of individuals and their relationships in order to understand the balance of social tensions behind the creation of we-ness in stepfamilies. To fulfil this task, we draw from two important discussions: the ideological shift regarding a child's family after parental separation, and family boundaries and institutionalization of remarriage.

Théry (1986) was among the first to detect the considerable change taking place from the 1970s onwards in perceptions of the best interest of the child in parental divorce. As she showed in the context of France, the understanding of divorce has shifted from a total dissolution of a family to a mere reorganization of family relations. The former understanding implied a *logic of substitution* in relation to what was considered best for a child after divorce and emphasized family roles; the sooner the custodial parent remarried and brought a new mother or father figure into the child's life, the better. The current understanding, on the other hand, sees divorce as a reorganization of family relations and relies on a *logic of durability*. The emphasis is on the continuity of the child's significant family relations based on biological descent. From the children's perspective, divorce has come to mean a transition to a family divided in two households (Théry, 1986).

These two logics influencing post-separation families imply differently drawn boundaries: the boundary following the logic of substitution encompasses the household, whereas the logic of durability encompasses both parents' households. While the latter perspective and understanding has been acknowledged in legislation in many European and North American societies, drawing from what is considered to meet the best interests of a child (Kurki-Suonio, 2000), it does not automatically coincide with the understanding of separated parents, their new partners and their new children (Furstenberg and Nord, 1985; Taanila et al., 2002). Stepfamilies have often been associated with ambiguous family boundaries (e.g. Braithwaite et al., 2001), defined by lack of clarity as to who belongs to the family (Boss and Greenberg, 1984; Stewart, 2005).

Previous research has stressed the effect of socioeconomic resources on the assumed parenting styles of fathers in stepfamilies. Studies of Le Gall and Martin (1998) and Edwards et al. (2002) suggest that parenting based on the logic of durability and on the idea of continuing responsibility and parent–child relationships is more prevalent among middle-class parents, whereas the logic of substitution and the idea of a new family replacing the old one is more common among working-class parents.

Issues of boundaries have also been linked to the 'institutionalization' of stepfamilies (Cherlin, 2004), where the type of union – marriage or cohabitation – plays a role. Based on a network approach, De Carlo et al. (2014) found that the definition of the boundaries of family configurations is strongly influenced by factors such as having a shared child or being

married to the new partner. Overall, the logic of durability and inclusiveness in families – versus substitution and exclusiveness – are social processes that may depend on a variety of life experiences and conditions of separated and re-partnered parents and their children. For instance, in a large quantitative study on partnerships in Switzerland (Kellerhals et al., 2004), the participation of women in the labour market was shown to be associated with distinct expectations about family life. Women with a life trajectory focused on working at home had a traditional understanding of their family life stressing their homemaker quality and their family as a closed entity, whereas women with life trajectories focused on paid work had a more open interpretation of their partnership and family context. Such understandings may well have consequences for family boundaries, as women with a homemaker identity might be more inclined to stress their current household as the ‘natural’ limit of their family and thus tilt the balance of interdependencies towards their new partnership.

Marriage is another marker of identity in Switzerland, as in other societies, that may have an effect on family membership. With the pluralization of life courses since the 1960s (e.g. Kohli, 2007), marriage has become selective. Overall, only about six persons in 10 will ever marry in Switzerland, and this proportion is even lower concerning remarriage (Kellerhals and Widmer, 2012). In the meantime, as stressed by Cherlin (2004), marriage has become a marker of success in one’s intimate life, conveying much prestige, as it publicly confirms the ability of individuals to form a durable bond acknowledged by society. It is associated in Switzerland with having children, heteronormativity, strong gender roles between partners and with the construction of what is believed by many, including governmental agencies and main political parties, as ‘the family’. Therefore, a new marriage may symbolize for divorced or separated individuals their ability to overcome past failures and to build a new foundation for family life and personal development (Théry, 1986). In this context, marriage as a rite of passage may contradict inclusiveness of family members originating from previous partnerships by stressing the new family with the current partner.

The extent to which remarriage can offer such a fresh start depends, however, on a variety of factors (e.g. Burgoyne and Clark, 1984; Cartwright, 2008). One important aspect is the duration of the previous partnership, in that if it lasted only for a short time, it may not have become strongly institutionalized, in the sense of gaining credibility with friends and family. In Burgoyne and Clark’s (1984) study of stepfamilies, for example, the duration of the first marriage was connected to the different ways in which remarried partners could relate to their past: disengaging from interdependencies with the previous partner was indeed a more likely option for people with small children than those with adolescents. Indeed, inclusiveness and exclusiveness in understanding one’s family may be regarded as changing according to individuals’ life experiences. Also, the time elapsed since the separation and the duration of the current partnership may play a role in how the family boundary is perceived. Time is an important aspect in stepfamily relations, as relationships and the ways in which boundaries are drawn change (Allan et al., 2011). Depending on the dissolving partnership and the conditions of the break-up, inclusiveness may become high soon after the separation and then diminish later on, or, in the case of a high-conflict separation, there may be room for more inclusive understanding only after considerable time has elapsed. Development of stepfamily relationships does not follow a standard timetable (Coleman et al., 2000).

Overall, the prospect of we-ness and flexible family boundaries in stepfamilies may relate to a series of social conditions that make them easier or harder to achieve. Although everyone

involved in post-separation families is likely to face difficulties related to family boundaries, the preferred solutions of individuals might be highly divergent according to their level of socioeconomic resources as well as the importance of conjugality and marital status for their self-identity. Children, although the most directly concerned in the matter, may well depend on their parents' views in developing their own perception of their family.

## Data and methods

The data come from the project 'Social Capital and Family Processes as Predictors of Stepfamily Outcomes' conducted in Geneva, Switzerland in 2009–2012. Women living in first-time families ( $N = 150$ ) and in stepfamilies ( $N = 150$ ; with at least one child from their previous partnership) were interviewed about their family configurations and life trajectories in structured individual interviews that asked respondents to report all individuals they considered as significant family members (Widmer and Favez, 2012). In addition, a second interview including a qualitative part that also involved respondents' partners and children was proposed to all respondents. Altogether, 78 families (30 first-time and 48 stepfamilies) participated in qualitative 'family interviews' that involved a 'Who are we?' task which asked all participants to write or draw a description of their family followed by a discussion among everyone present. In the majority of refusals, women declined to participate in the qualitative part because of the videotaping and because they did not want to involve their children and partner in the study. Following standard formal procedures, the research received the approval of the ethical committee, and all participants were given precise information about the use of the data and their rights of declining to participate to the study or any parts of it.

In this analysis, we focus on the families of 48 re-partnered women who participated in both parts of the study, the structured individual interview and the qualitative family interview, our main interest being in the family descriptions written and drawn in the 'Who are we?' task. The female respondents were 28–49 years old (mean 38 years), mainly in heterosexual unions (one same-sex couple). Most were cohabiting (32 couples) with their partner, but some were married (16 couples). The age of the children participating in family interviews varied from 5 to 13 years. The family structures varied: 11 families had only her children, 22 had her children and shared, 12 had her and her current partner's children, and 3 families had her, his and shared children. Partners' children did not necessarily live in the household, and some were already adults. The respondents in the qualitative part were similar (no statistically significant difference) to individuals in the main sample in terms of educational level, work participation, household income, duration and status of the current partnership (cohabiting or married), duration of the previous partnership and place of birth (Switzerland or abroad). The family structure, however, was significantly associated with the likelihood of participating in the qualitative part: families with a shared child were more likely to participate ( $\chi^2 = 7.8$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ).

Family interviews took place at the home of the female respondent and were attended by her partner and at least one child from her previous union. Participants were instructed to present or portray their family by writing or drawing (Widmer and Favez, 2012). Afterwards, the descriptions were shown to others and discussed together. The researcher acted as a facilitator during the activity; participants' descriptions were not questioned in any way and everyone was given time to explain her or his description. The researcher emphasized the voluntariness of participation and no stress was laid on participants at any point. Adults seemed aware of the potential sensitivity of the topic especially for children and acted accordingly by trying to



make children feel relaxed. The discussions were not very long, as children would often get bored, but participants were concentrated and considerate towards others. For many adults, the activity offered a rare occasion to hear each other's, and especially the children's, thoughts, and some explicitly thanked the researcher afterwards for the opportunity.

The research material allows us to compare family descriptions made by mothers, their partners and their children. The analysis follows a mixed approach using qualitative and quantitative methods, and proceeds in three phases. We first consider how inclusivity and exclusivity are developed in descriptions made in the public context of family interviews. Second, we code all descriptions systematically to determine the divide of descriptions in terms of exclusiveness and inclusiveness. Third, by using multiple correspondence analysis (Roux and Rouanet, 2010), we investigate the link between descriptions and social conditions in which interviewed individuals are embedded.

This study is explorative, as it is based on a small number of mostly middle-class step-families residing in Geneva, a wealthy and highly urbanized city in a country with a liberal welfare state (e.g. Esping-Andersen, 2009) that has for years promoted a rather passive family policy based on traditional gender attitudes (Fux, 2008). We aim to uncover some of the logic of family exclusiveness and inclusiveness in this specific context, while assuming that the highlighted mechanisms may have resonance in other contexts as well.

## **Family descriptions made by mothers, partners and children**

Written and drawn family descriptions made in the context of family interviews were of two kinds: descriptions that explicitly commented on the composition of family (90 of 144 descriptions) and those that described family as a whole with no reference to who belongs to it (54 of 144 descriptions). Descriptions that explicitly commented on the composition of the family depicted or listed all those considered as family members, whereas descriptions depicting family as a whole characterized it with a few descriptive adjectives ('loving', 'supportive', 'united', 'challenging', 'reconstituted') or with a few sentences about the family's everyday life.

The descriptions are illuminating in terms of family boundaries and how they are drawn after separation and re-partnering. In the analysis, we looked for elements that we considered as indicating exclusiveness or inclusiveness in perceptions of family. Exclusive elements are those that highlight the research participant's family as a clearly bounded unit formed solely around the mother's current partnership and the children involved. This definition draws from the logic of substitution (Théry, 1986) that determines a post-separation family as replacing the dissolved family unit in the sense that a parent moving out of the family home after separation is replaced by a new partner. Inclusiveness, on the other hand, is indicated in the descriptions wherein participants mention ex-partners, children's other parents, or half-siblings as inherently connected to the configuration formed around the mother's new partnership. Inclusive descriptions acknowledge family relationships reaching beyond the current partnership and the impact of these relationships on the everyday life of a stepfamily; they imply continuity of family relationships after separation and re-partnering (Théry, 1986).

We will later discuss in more detail the criteria for systematic coding of descriptions, but let us now turn to the variation in descriptions. In the first example, we find both exclusive and inclusive descriptions. The mother has a new partner, a 9-year-old



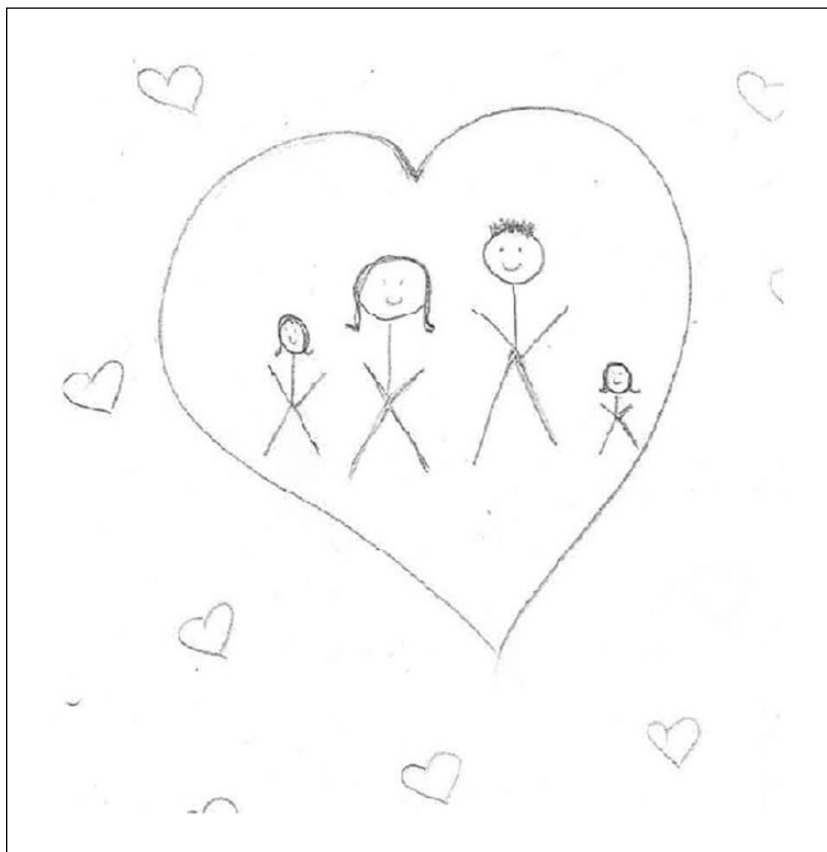
daughter from her first union, and a 3-year-old daughter from the current union. The partner has no children from previous relationships.

The mother's drawing (see Figure 1) is a stereotypical illustration of a nuclear family: a woman, a man and two children. Her family is a clearly bounded unit formed solely around her current partnership and her children; no reference is made to her daughter's father, her previous partner.

The partner's drawing (see Figure 2) is quite similar: four persons inside a house sitting around a dinner table.

The descriptions made by the mother and her partner are centred on the current partnership. No reference is made to family relationships reaching beyond this household.

However, the drawing of the 9-year-old daughter is different (see Figure 3), as she has included her father. The father is the only person not holding hands with the rest, and she has drawn a heart beside him. The father and daughter see each other regularly and are in weekly contact.



**Figure 1.** Mother's drawing.



Figure 2. Partner’s drawing.



Figure 3. Daughter’s drawing.

The mother's and partner's descriptions are clear in their idea of the family composition: a family of two parents and two children, in keeping with the prevailing idea of a nuclear family. The daughter's view is different and acknowledges the relationship with her father.

Family descriptions were mostly quite coherent with each other, and children's descriptions often followed those of adults, regarding exclusiveness or inclusiveness. If the adults' descriptions did not comment on the composition or were explicitly exclusive in nature, children's descriptions often conformed. However, in seven cases, the child's description diverged from those of the mother and partner by being more inclusive and by including the father or half-sibling living elsewhere, as in the case above.

Another case in point in this regard is our second example: a mother, her partner, her 11-year-old son from her previous relationship and two sons from the current union. The mother is expecting another baby and writes that 'our family is about to be complete. If I had to draw it, I would draw a large sun, representing [Partner] and five rays which represent the boys and myself.' Her partner describes his family as 'a family in the old way. The man works in the fields while the woman takes care of the family and gives orders at home.' For her 11-year-old son, family is different and includes his father and a half-brother from his father's new union: 'My family is large, reconstituted and nice. I have almost five brothers (one paternal and three maternal). My parents divorced and Mum got remarried with [Partner] and Dad is in love again.'

The divergence between adults' and children's descriptions in these cases informs us about the different positions adults and children occupy in terms of exclusiveness and inclusiveness in families after re-partnering. From the perspective of adults, a new partnership replaces the old one, and adults are inclined to perceive family as a clearly bounded unit formed exclusively around the new partnership and as substituting the dissolved family unit. Children, on the other hand, supported by law and by the prevalent understanding of family relationships continuing beyond parental separation, are more frequently motivated to be inclusive in their family perception and to maintain their relationships with both parents (Furstenberg and Nord, 1985; Golish, 2003; Taanila et al., 2002; Walker and Messinger, 1979).

It has been frequently noted that children often include in their family the parent with whom they do not live (e.g. Furstenberg and Nord, 1985; Larsson Sjöberg, 2000; Ritala-Koskinen, 2001; Smart et al., 2001). In this regard, it is surprising that many children in this study did not include their father despite having regular contact with him. One possible explanation lies in the collective setting of the family interview: the mother, partner and child were all present and interviewed together at the mother's home. This setting and location framed the discussion and probably directed children's attention to the people present. A 12-year-old boy's discussion of his drawing illuminates the importance of the context. He has drawn a lively picture of a house and people living in it: his mother, two siblings, his mother's partner and the partner's two children: 'I made a drawing where we almost all are. Here. I don't know how to define my family. My family is my sister, my brother, my mother and then, well ... I don't know where to put my father. Because, he is not, I don't know. He is not ... [mother and her partner try to help him] in

this project. [One of the adults asks him: “He is part of your family?”] Yes, yes. I did my family as it is here, and without the other part.’

Most of the mothers’ descriptions were exclusive and highlighted the current family as a bounded unit. Our fourth family example illustrates this tendency well, in addition to the subtle ways in which children try to balance their mother’s new partnership with their continuing relationship with their father.

A re-partnered mother of a 12-year-old daughter from her previous union explains how she treasures the moments with her partner and daughter and the evenings all three of them spend together. She mentions her parents and siblings as part of her extended family but says, ‘as far as I’m concerned, what is most important is my daughter and partner’.

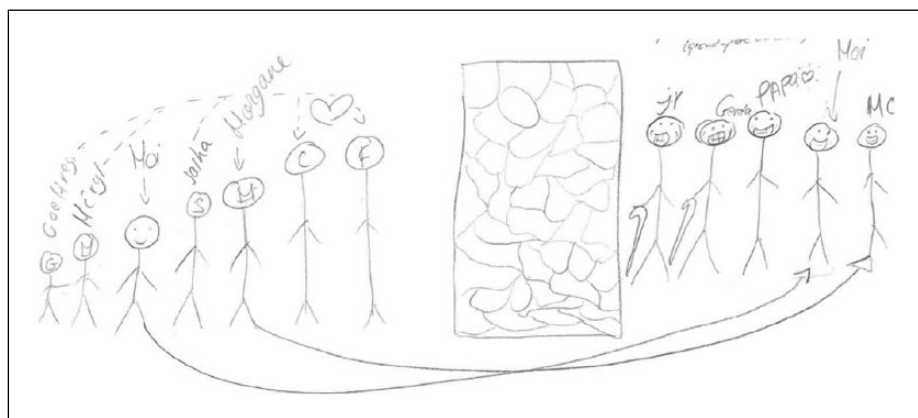
The family boundary is very restrictive in this description. Her partner’s description is similar to hers, as he has drawn three persons (‘a little drawing of us three’: a man, a woman and a child). The description given by the 12-year-old daughter conforms to this composition, although she does not write about being a family but about living together: ‘I live with [mother’s partner] and my mother. I like to do my homework with [mother’s partner].’ She has first addressed her mother’s partner as her stepfather, but then crossed out the word ‘stepfather’ and written the partner’s name instead. She does not mention her father, with whom she is in daily contact and visits every week. It is as if she has two separate worlds: one with her mother and her mother’s partner, and the other with her father.

In the above case, all descriptions can be characterized as having exclusive elements: the descriptions confined to the household composition formed around the new partnership. Interestingly, this exclusiveness contradicts the list of significant family members that the mother cited in the structured individual interview, which included her ex-husband and his parents. The contradiction may originate in the two settings of data collection: structured individual interviews on the one hand, and family interviews conducted in the presence of the partner, children and a researcher, on the other. This contradiction informs us about the sensitivity of the boundary issue in re-partnered families and about how a stepfamily is actively created (cf. Morgan, 1999) and displayed (cf. Finch, 2007) in a public context, characterized by a specific set of social tensions among interdependent individuals with distinct orientations but also unequal power.

Not only the children but also some mothers and partners described family in inclusive ways. Figure 4 illustrates the ways in which mothers’ and partners’ descriptions incorporated inclusive elements. A 41-year-old mother of one and a stepmother of two children drew three houses symbolizing the three homes of the children: her home, the home of her ex-partner and the home of her partner’s ex-wife.

She also drew her partner’s adult son, who visits occasionally, and her parents and brother. Inclusiveness in a description like this draws from the recognition of the intertwined relationships within which individuals are embedded. The paths drawn from one house to another indicate the acknowledgement of the continuity of children’s family relationships, explicitly recognizing children’s dual membership in their father’s and mother’s households. Her partner’s description made no comment on the different





**Figure 5.** Daughter's drawing.

unit (Théry, 1986) and is inclusive in the sense that it is not defined by her mother's current partnership but by her own ongoing relationships with people she considers family.

To sum up the main findings of the qualitative analysis, we highlight two points. First, the descriptions made by the mother, her partner and her child were in most cases in concordance with each other and diverged radically in only seven cases. Congruous descriptions highlighted the importance of the setting in which family descriptions were collected: in a family interview, 'doing' family and family 'we-ness' come into play and generate a specific balance of social tensions among participants. Research on whom mothers and children see as family in individual interviews reveals different results: repartnered mothers often cite a much larger group of people as significant family members in individual rather than family interviews (De Carlo et al., 2014), and children often mention their other parent as family (e.g. Smart et al., 2001). In addition, congruous descriptions emphasize the significance of the physical context in the way in which children view their family (Mason and Tipper, 2008).

Second, even though the way in which family is presented varies considerably, all descriptions deal with inclusiveness and exclusiveness in one way or another. Almost two-thirds of the descriptions explicitly commented on the family's composition, but even descriptions that depicted the family as an entity presented it either without a reference to relationships reaching to other households (i.e. in exclusive terms) or as defined by its reconstituted character (i.e. acknowledging the relationships originating from previous partnerships). Next we will look for the possible reasons explaining this variation.

## Social structuration of family descriptions

To combine the analysis of exclusiveness and inclusiveness in family descriptions with the structured information on mothers and their partnerships collected in the structured individual interviews, all descriptions were coded as exclusive, inclusive or mixed. The third category was added to better grasp the nuances of rich qualitative data.

Descriptions were coded as exclusive if they focused solely on the mother's current partnership and the children involved. Exclusive descriptions did not mention previous partners, children's other parents, or siblings living elsewhere and lacked references to family relations originating in previous partnerships. These exclusive descriptions sometimes included lists of family members or pictures of a woman, a man and children drawn inside a heart or a house, for example, as in the drawings shown in Figures 1 and 2. In other cases, they included written depictions characterizing family as an entity. Some applied metaphors drew heavily on culturally laden family ideals. A case in point is the description made by a mother with one child from her previous union and another from the current one: 'I see our family as an immense castle with a fireplace that warms the whole house. A lot of love and warmth when we all gather in front of the fireplace and talk about the day. Really a solid family cocoon with a lot of discussion and understanding.'

Descriptions were coded as inclusive if they mentioned an ex-partner, ex-in-laws, or children's other parent as family members or explicitly acknowledged the existence of family relationships reaching beyond the mother's current partnership. For example, in a description coded as inclusive, a mother of three writes: 'We are five. Or actually, the father of Marie and Simon [children from her previous partnership] is missing here. Carl [current partner] is the father of Yves and I'm the mother of three children.' The drawings in Figures 3, 4 and 5 are examples of descriptions coded as inclusive.

Descriptions coded as mixed focused mainly on the mother's current partnership and the children involved, but made some reference to previous partnerships, children's two homes, or the daily changing composition of family members at home. For example, one partner explained: 'I've only written some words: diversity and permanence, centre, heart, and come-and-go. Because the family is large and there are people who come and go. It's only a small part of the family here, because family has many definitions. It's coming and going around the centre.' Descriptions including elements such as this one were coded as mixed.

Table 1 presents the results of the systematic coding of descriptions.

Interestingly, the extent to which individuals maintained inclusive views was rather weak. The majority of descriptions were exclusive. This is especially the case for mothers, as only five of 48 provided an inclusive description of their family in the presence of their current partner. Partners presented more mixed views than mothers, but a large majority of them still hold exclusive views. Children were more inclusive, with 15 of them presenting either an inclusive or mixed description. This emphasis on

**Table 1.** Coding of family descriptions.

Description / Interviewee	Mother	Partner	Child
Inclusive	5 (10%)	3 (6%)	8 (18%)
Exclusive	38 (80%)	31 (65%)	29 (66%)
Mixed	5 (10%)	14 (29%)	7 (16%)
Total	48 (100%)	48 (100%)	44 <sup>a</sup> (100%)

<sup>a</sup>Four descriptions made by children could not be coded in any of these terms. Child had drawn an self-portrait, for example.



exclusiveness in descriptions collected in family interviews stands in sharp contrast with the results of structured individual interviews of mothers, which revealed a wide variety of ways of defining family with a more balanced share of inclusive and exclusive perceptions (De Carlo et al., 2014).

In order to better grasp the embeddedness of family descriptions in the social conditions and life experiences of individuals, while taking into account the small sample size, we use multiple correspondence analysis (MCA), a multidimensional descriptive scaling technique that has seen wide application in the social sciences as a non-causal quantitative approach permitting one to highlight the associations existing between two or more variables (Roux and Rouanet, 2010). We aim to show how a set of social characteristics is associated with inclusiveness and exclusiveness in family descriptions in the 48 cases. Due to the limited size of the data and to the explorative nature of this part of the study, we do not intend to provide definite answers about what causes inclusivity or exclusivity but rather to suggest fruitful hypotheses for future research. Decomposing a matrix into its basic structure based on singular value decomposition (SVD), correspondence analysis examines the relations among rows or columns without distinguishing between dependent and independent variables. The method provides a visual representation derived from a chi-square decomposition of contingency tables. Response categories that are close to one another in the two-dimensional space present similar response patterns, while those that are distant have dissimilar patterns.

The analysis combines the systematic coding of descriptions by research participants in inclusive, exclusive and mixed descriptions with the information on mothers and their partnerships. We included information about mothers' union status (married or cohabiting), educational level (high or low) and rate of employment (high or low). In addition, we included information about family structure (whether there were shared children or only children with previous partners) as well as three indicators related to the timing of mothers' family trajectories: the length of the previous partnership (i.e. with the father of the child), the number of years elapsed since the separation and the number of years spent in the current partnership. The first two axes (with eigenvalues above 2) were selected. Both presented adequate levels of consistency and good inertia values. Specific variables contributed to the construction of each dimension. Family structure, union type, duration of the current partnership and time elapsed since separation from the previous partner contributed to Dimension 1, while family structure and perception of the child contributed strongly to Dimension 2.

The MCA of Figure 6 presents three relatively distinct clusters of social conditions associated with inclusiveness and exclusiveness in family views. The first cluster, in the upper-right, includes mothers, partners and children who have presented inclusive views of their families. They more often belong to family structures in which both partners have children from previous relationships. The level of education of mothers is high, and they more often work full-time or almost full-time compared to individuals in the other clusters of responses. The second cluster, in the lower-right corner, features mothers who have just recently separated from their former partner. They have been in a new partnership only for a short time, and they do not have children with their current partner. This cluster of social conditions was associated with mixed family descriptions. The third cluster, on the left near the horizontal axis, features individuals with an exclusive

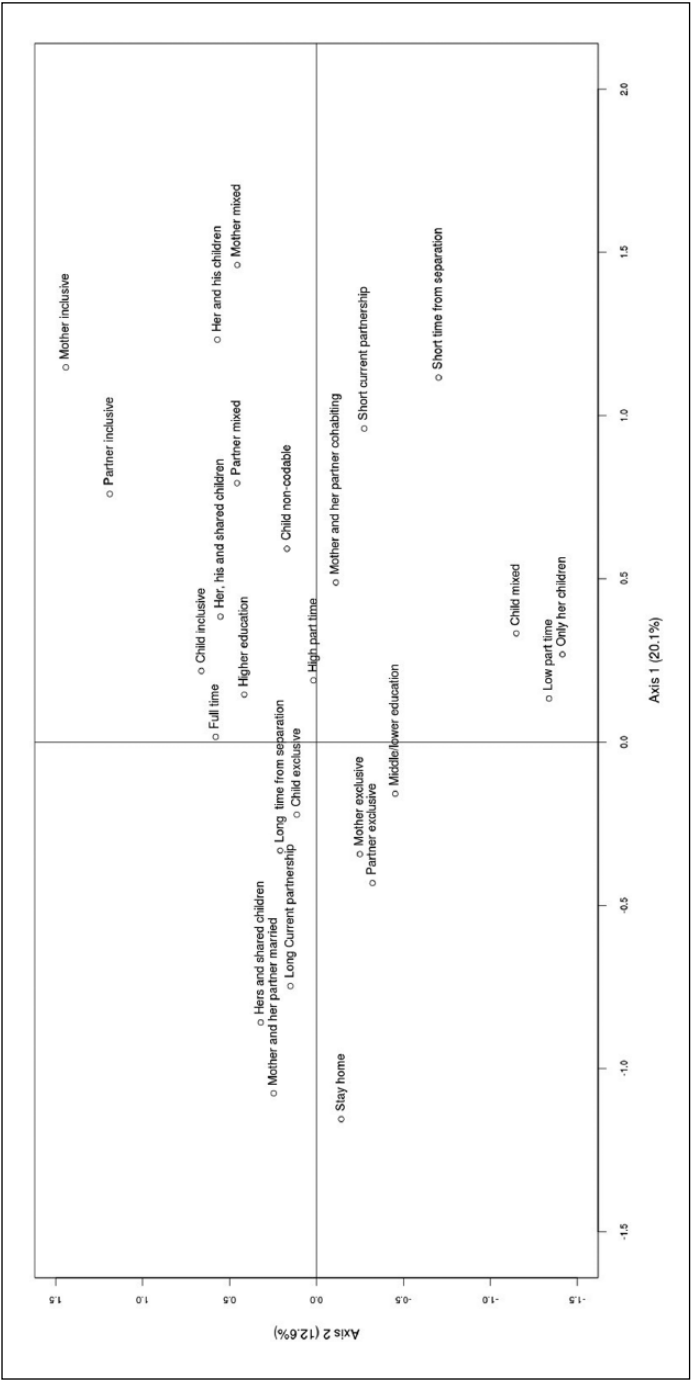


Figure 6. Results of the MCA.

understanding of their family. Mothers in this cluster show a medium to low level of education, are more often married, are homemakers and have a child with their current partner. They have separated from their previous partner a long time ago.

## Discussion

We have examined family descriptions in stepfamilies, with a focus on boundaries between those considered family and those excluded from it. We have analysed the building of family *we-ness* as a process in which family boundaries are constructed in a balance of social tensions related to power among interdependent individuals with partly contradicting goals and interests. Adults' and children's family descriptions collected in family interviews make the social tensions generated by mutual interdependencies visible in a way individual interviews are unable to.

Although mothers', partners' and children's descriptions were of different kinds – either written or drawn – they all dealt with inclusiveness or exclusiveness in one way or another. Two-thirds of the descriptions explicitly commented on the family composition, while most of those that characterized family as an entity either depicted family without a reference to relationships reaching to other households or commented on their family's reconstituted character. Most descriptions of interdependent individuals were congruous with each other, but in seven cases, the child's view diverged radically by being more inclusive than the adults'.

Systematic coding of descriptions in three groups (inclusive, exclusive and mixed descriptions) showed that exclusive descriptions were most prominent in this set of data. Mothers particularly depicted their family in exclusive terms, without any reference to previous partners or the partners' relatives. Partners' and children's descriptions were also mainly exclusive, although compared to adults, children were more likely to describe their family in inclusive ways.

Inclusive descriptions acknowledging family relationships originating from previous partnerships and reaching to different households, and mixed descriptions that in some way addressed a family's reconstituted character (by referring to children moving between two homes, for example) were a minority in all groups. However, about a third of partners' and children's descriptions were either inclusive or mixed. Mothers' inclusive or mixed descriptions were connected to the mother's higher education, extensive part-time or full-time work, and a cohabiting instead of married relationship. Two family structures seemed to particularly encourage inclusive descriptions: families with her and his children, and families with her, his and shared children. These results tend to suggest that inclusivity is more difficult to maintain when individuals hold to social statuses typically associated with traditional nuclear family roles and a gendered division of labour and reproduction (cf. Parsons, 1943). Our analysis is, however, only a preliminary indication of the various ways by which social conditions may influence family inclusivity, as large quantitative studies are needed for a more definitive understanding.

In their analysis of family boundaries in British stepfamilies, Allan et al. (2011) conclude that stepfamily members' different family memberships, their different constellations of commitment and solidarity and their different kinship histories are not easily moulded into a shared sense of belonging and connection. How, then, can the prevalence

of exclusiveness in family perceptions after separation and re-partnering in these data be interpreted? The results suggest that re-partnered mothers carry the main responsibility for the we-ness of family in public situations, where family needs to be displayed for outsiders such as researchers, while partners and children can to a certain extent hold on to more individual views. Contrastingly, in structured individual interviews, mothers were more inclined to mention also their ex-partner and ex-in-laws as family members (De Carlo et al., 2014). By presenting family that has been formed around their new partnership as a clearly bounded unit, mothers actively created their family in a way that resembles first-time families and downplays its reconstituted character. This 'doing' emphasizes the people enclosed by a clear boundary following the household composition as a 'we'. Such an understanding follows the nuclear family ideal composed of a limited number of predefined positions: that of a mother, father and child, and which is more or less threatened by the possibility of parallel positions, such as those of two father figures (Castrén and Högbäck, 2014).

Our results also suggest that the idea of a new family forming around a new partnership to replace the dissolved family unit may still hold in Swiss society. This applies especially to families of women with a traditional orientation regarding partnership type and labour force participation. However, explicit boundary and emphasis on stepfamily as the new 'we' is inherently a double-edged sword; from children's perspective, it can be highly problematic, as they are often motivated to maintain close relationships with their other parent (most often their father, in the Swiss context). The large number of children's descriptions that conformed to the exclusive views of adults despite children's regular contact with their father suggested that children have to adjust to the shifting balance of social tensions characterizing their family life in various settings, including the family interview situation. This adjustment can be interpreted in at least two ways. It may imply that children's perception of their family is divided into two parts, which merge in their internalized understanding of family as a 'we'-group. This interpretation aligns well with studies showing how children in post-separation families distinguish between family as a group of emotionally significant intimates and as a configuration of people with whom everyday life is shared (Larsson Sjöberg, 2000; Ritala-Koskinen, 2001). Children in the present study may have emphasized this latter aspect of family life, and it is likely that had the father been present in the interview, he would have been included. Children's adjustment to adults' views can also indicate that children are continually switching between the two parts of their family and identifying simultaneously as insiders and outsiders in their parents' households. The extent to which such potentially conflicting memberships leave room for these relationships to build up an internalized we-ness is a question that should be explored in future research.

The high level of separation and re-partnering in society produces multi-fold configurations of family relationships. Feelings of belonging and experience of we-ness related to family develop individually, as they are not automatically shared by anyone else. 'We' becomes a highly individualized understanding of one's family rather than a collectively shared family identity. In stepfamily contexts, this we-ness is constructed in a balance of social tensions (cf. Elias, 1978) that become visible in data collected in family interviews that allow adults' and children's views to be analysed concurrently. In order to develop a

sense of collective identity or we-ness after separation and re-partnering, flexibility of family boundaries or tolerance towards family members' varying views of family composition are necessary (cf. Furstenberg and Nord, 1985). In this process, mothers are in a key position (Trinder, 2008) and they may be particularly significant as gatekeepers in the Swiss context, where the legal emphasis on joint custody and joint parental responsibility after separation, shared by many European societies, collides with notably traditional gender attitudes according to which mothers have the main responsibility for children and their wellbeing.

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## Résumé

Cette étude examine des descriptions familiales après une séparation et une nouvelle union, en mettant l'accent sur les frontières de la famille, entre ceux qui sont considérés comme faisant partie de la famille et ceux qui en sont exclus. Les adultes dans les belles-familles peuvent essayer de maintenir un grand nombre de liens familiaux provenant de différents partenaires ou de limiter la reconnaissance familiale aux membres de leur nouveau foyer. D'un autre côté, les enfants sont encouragés à maintenir un contact avec leurs deux parents et leurs proches. Les descriptions familiales de 48 mères ayant contracté une nouvelle union et résidant en Suisse, ainsi que celles de leurs partenaires et de leurs enfants, sont analysées en se concentrant sur l'exclusivité et l'inclusivité dans les descriptions écrites ou dessinées. Les descriptions collectées lors des entretiens



familiaux coïncident avec l'équilibre des tensions sociales entre les individus interdépendants et les réponses des enfants correspondent généralement à celles de leurs mères. Les réponses des mères témoignent d'un haut niveau d'exclusivité, alors que celles des partenaires des mères et de leurs enfants sont plus équilibrées entre exclusivité et inclusivité. L'inclusivité dans la famille après une nouvelle union est aussi liée à des conditions telles que la structure familiale, l'éducation de la mère et l'emploi.

### **Mots-clés**

Belles-familles, frontières de la famille, exclusivité, inclusivité, perspective configurationnelle

### **Resumen**

Este estudio examina las descripciones de las familias después de la separación y la formación de nuevas parejas, con foco en los límites de la familia entre las que se consideran de la familia y los excluidos de la misma. Los adultos en las familias ensambladas pueden tratar de mantener un gran número de vínculos familiares procedentes de diversas asociaciones, o pueden limitar el reconocimiento de su familia a los miembros de su nuevo hogar. A los niños, por otro lado, se les anima a mantener contacto con ambos padres y sus familiares. Son analizadas descripciones sobre familia de 48 madres residentes en Suiza que volvieron a casarse, así como a sus parejas e hijos actuales, centrándose en la exclusividad y la inclusión en las descripciones escritas o dibujadas. Las descripciones recogidas en las entrevistas familiares siguen un equilibrio de las tensiones sociales entre los individuos interdependientes por lo que las respuestas de los niños por lo general coinciden con los de sus madres. Las respuestas de las madres muestran un alto nivel de exclusividad, mientras que las respuestas de las parejas de las madres y los niños son más equilibradas entre la exclusividad y la inclusividad. La inclusión en la familia después de formar una nueva pareja también está conectado a condiciones tales como la estructura de la familia, la educación de las madres y el empleo.

### **Palabras clave**

Familia ensamblada, límite de la familia, exclusividad, inclusión, la perspectiva configuracional