

## **Impact of Real versus Step-Parental Rejection and Social Competence on Psychological Maladjustment of Pakistani Girls**

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The current study dealt with girls' perception about step and real parental rejection and social competence in determining their psychological maladjustment. The sample comprised of 100 girls living with at least one step-parent (mother or father) within two parent families. Urdu translated versions of Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire-Child Version (Malik, 2012), Social Competence Scale for Children (Shujja & Malik, 2011), and Personality Assessment Questionnaire (Naz & Kausar, 2011) were used to assess study variables. Findings revealed that girls' perception about step and real parental rejection was significantly correlated with their psychological maladjustment. Social competence was associated with perceived parental rejection among girls in stepmother–real father families only. It was also observed that girls living in stepmother–real father families were more socially competent than their counterparts living in stepfather–real mother families were. Findings further revealed that for girls belonging to stepfather–real mother families, perceived maternal as well as stepfather rejection predicted their psychological maladjustment. However, in stepmother–real father families, perceived stepmother rejection was the only significant predictor of girls' psychological maladjustment. Findings have been discussed within indigenous cultural context.

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From the developmental perspective, step parenting poses serious threat to psychosocial adjustment of children, especially, stepparent-child relationships, life satisfaction, and negative emotional outcomes (Amato, 2006; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002). Stepparents are those who enter in a new marital relationship through remarriage after the death, separation, or divorce of one's spouse and have at least one child from previous marriage (Feijten, Boyle, Feng, Gayle, & Graham, 2009). Remarriage places greater responsibility on stepparents to adjust with new family environment and stepchildren, specifically stepmothers because children may likely to be resistant to the inclusion of stepparent in their family setup (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002; O'Connor & Insabella, 1999). Researchers concluded that children are less likely to show care and warmth, and are more likely to exhibit negative responses towards their stepmothers (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994).

Researchers report that in order to fulfill the demands of new marital relationship and that of stepchildren, some stepparents (mothers and fathers) take too much pain and burden to care for stepchildren, even more than their biological parents do (Cartwright, 2010). Intuitively, extra step parental care and warmth should help to develop positive stepparent-child relationship, but unfortunately, it happens otherwise. Children do not welcome step parental involvement in their life and perceive their stepparents more controlling (Ferri & Smith, 1996). Researchers also report strong association between authoritative parenting and positive psychological development in children but stepparents rarely use authoritative parenting with children (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002).

There are some other factors along with step parenting that may affect psychosocial adjustment of children, for example, child gender and duration of step parenting. Step parenting research reviews demonstrate that children strongly resist the change in family structure in first two years of parental remarriage. Stepmother-child relationship in first two years after marriage remains unstable because of conflicts and negative communication. After two years, communication between stepmother and child is likely to improve and conflicts are resolved (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Although parent-child relationship improves after first two years of remarriage, but children's adjustment difficulties remain and stepparent-child conflicts arise again at the age of adolescence (Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Researchers report gender differences in attitude towards stepparents; especially, girls are more likely to face

externalizing and internalizing problems due to presence of stepfather in the family (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Another study reports that girls face more difficulties in interacting with stepfather than boys (Vuchinich, 1991).

Despite several adjustment problems like low academic achievement, school dropouts, emotional, and psychosocial difficulties (Rodgers & Pryor, 1998), some stepparents, and stepchildren may find different ways to establish positive interaction in order to make stepfamily environment more pleasant and smooth. For this, stepparents and stepchildren use strong adaptive skills, which, in turn, help them in attaining the task of becoming psychologically adjusted in stepfamily environment (Hetherington, 1999; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002).

### **Stepfather-Real Mother Families and Psychosocial Adjustment of Children**

Plenty of research work related to stepfamilies and psychosocial well being of children has been conducted on stepfather-real mother family setup. Researchers' work revealed that low social competence and high externalizing problems are prevalent in children of stepfather-mother families than father-mother families or single parent families (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982). Aughinbaugh, Pierret, and Rothstein (2005) report more behavioral problems in girls than in boys during late childhood, but Dunn et al. (1998) demonstrate higher prevalence of behavioral, social, and emotional problems in boys in early childhood. Many studies reported that stepfather-stepson relationship is more likely to remain positive than stepfather-stepdaughter relationship (Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington, 1993). Furthermore, substantial research on step-parenting supports the findings that specifically, girls view the stepfather-stepdaughter relationship more negatively and such negative relationship may lead the stepfathers to use coercion (Hetherington, 1999). Socially competent adolescents are more likely to develop positive relationship with their stepfathers subsequent to their mother's marriage (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992).

Studies revealed that biological parent-child relationship quality acts as strong mediator between stepparent relationship and subsequent socio-emotional development in children. The data collected from parents or children, parental depression, parent-child relationship quality, and socioeconomic difficulties turned out to be important factors in determining the stepfather-stepchild relationship

and subsequent children's socio-emotional adjustment (Dunn, 2002; Dunn et al., 1998; Dunn, Davies, O'Connor, & Sturgess, 2001; O'Connor, Dunn, Jenkins, Pickering, & Rasbash, 2001). Researchers found that children have more close relationship with their biological mother than with stepfather. After the remarriage, parents rarely use authoritative parenting style and parent-child relationship become less positive and more conflicting, but with the passage of time, parents start using authoritative parenting and positive, conflict-free parent-child relationship gets reestablished (Golombok & Tasker, 2015).

### **Stepmother-Real Father Families and Psychosocial Adjustment of Children**

Remarriage of father and entry of stepmother in children's family setup poses challenges, specifically, for the stepmothers like getting on with new roles, demands of marital relationship and new family, and parenting stepchildren (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002; O'Connor & Insabella, 1999). Far less information is available about socio-emotional adjustment of children and stepmother-child relationship than stepfather-child relationship and related behavioral adjustment (Golombok & Tasker, 2015). Studies conducted on American (Fine, 1986) and Australian samples (Planitz & Feeney, 2009) to investigate the perception about stepmother revealed that stepmothers were perceived less positive than their biological mothers. In the same stream, a qualitative study reported that the students who spent their early childhood with stepmother gave less favorable opinion about stepmother-child relationship than relationship with stepfather (Gorell-Barnes, Thompson, Daniel, & Burchardt, 1998). In comparison to stepmothers, children are more securely attached and show more positive behavior towards their biological mother than towards stepmothers because children perceive their biological mothers as caring (Golombok & Tasker, 2015).

Children are usually pre-occupied with negative schema about step parenting, specifically stepmothers and girls are more likely to develop negative attitude about stepparents (mother or father) than do the boys (Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington, 1993). On the contrary, children show positive responses towards biological parents because they consider them more considerate, kind, and caring than stepparents. Studies reveal that little attention has been paid towards children's perception about stepparents compared to stepparent-child

relationship and children's outcomes (Cartwright, 2008; Coleman et al., 2000).

Despite the adversities in stepparent-child relationship, social competence helps the children or stepparents to adjust with changed family environment that is inevitable due to parental remarriage (Hetherington, 1999; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002). Although plenty of work on step parenting and stepfamilies has been done around the globe; yet, our indigenous cultural demands, different family dynamics, and socializing practices restrict us from generalizing the finding of Western research to Pakistani population. Moreover, large number of studies claimed social competence as culturally bound construct (Chen, Rubin, & Li, 1995; Ogbu, 1981; Shujja & Malik, 2011). Therefore, it is essential to assess social competence indigenously in order to investigate its role in relation to stepparent-child relationship and children's psychological adjustment. In addition, scarcity of research regarding girls' perception about parents and stepparents, social competence, and psychological maladjustment drew us to investigate this missing link.

Based on existing review of literature, it is hypothesized that parental rejection will be more negatively associated with social competence and positively related with psychological maladjustment among girls who belong to stepmother-father families compared to their counterparts who belong to stepfather-mother families. Secondly, there will be significant mean differences on step and real parental rejection, social competence, and psychological maladjustment. Thirdly, girls' perception about stepmother rejection and social competence would emerge as significant predictors of psychological maladjustment compared to perception about real mother-father rejection and stepfather rejection.

## Method

### Sample

Sample of the present study comprised of 100 girls with age range 9-14 years ( $M = 12.34$ ,  $SD = .98$ ) drawn from 15 government and private schools of Lahore through purposive sampling technique. The sample was further categorized in two categories: 1) girls living with stepmother-father families ( $n = 53$ ) and 2) girls living in stepfather-mother families ( $n = 47$ ). The age of mothers and stepmothers ranged from 25-55 years ( $M = 37.42$ ,  $SD = 6$ ); whereas, age of stepfathers and fathers ranged from 30-69 years ( $M = 43.8$ ,  $SD = 6.4$ ). From the total sample, 28 girls reported that their mothers

were illiterate and 72 reported that their mothers have passed matriculation. Similarly, 22 fathers were reported as illiterate compared to 78 fathers who attained matriculation as the highest level of formal education. Mostly girls belonged to lower middle class families with average family income of PKR 34000 per month.

**Inclusion criteria.** As literature suggests that children show negative responses towards stepparents within two years of parental remarriage and stepparent-child relationship may improve after two years (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992); therefore, the current study included girls whose parents were remarried within two years before the collection of data. Moreover, we included the girls who were living with one stepparent (mother or father) and one biological parent (mother or father).

**Exclusion criteria.** Girls who belonged to single parent family, complex stepmother-father family (the type of family in which stepmother has at least one child from previous marriage) were excluded. Specifically, complex stepfamily condition may confound because children from such families have been reported to have more relationship and psychosocial difficulties than those experienced by children in simple stepmother-father families, stepfather-mother families, or mother-father families (O'Connor, Dunn, Jenkins, Pickering, & Rasbash, 2001). Secondly, girls having parents with over two years (on average) duration of remarriage were also excluded from the sample.

## **Instruments**

**Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire - Child Version (Child PARQ; Malik, 2012).** Urdu translated version of Child PARQ (mother-father version; Malik, 2012 originally developed by Rohner & Khaleque, 2008) comprised of 60 items self-report measure, which was administered on children to assess their perception about mother or father. Both PARQ mother and father versions cover four domains of parenting styles that is, Warmth/Affection, Hostility/Aggression, Indifference/Neglect, and Undifferentiated Rejection. Child PARQ rated on a 4-point Likert scale with response format ranging from *almost always true* (4) to *never true to me* (1). In addition, high score on both PARQ mother and father version reflects high level of maternal and paternal rejection and vice versa. Both versions of

PARQ enjoy sound psychometric properties, for example, study reported alpha coefficient of .96 for the father version and .95 for the mother version (Lila, Garcia, & Garcia, 2007). For the current study, alpha coefficients for PARQ mother and father version were found to be .91 and .94, respectively. Sample items of mother version of Child PARQ are “*my mother makes me feel wanted and needed*” (Warmth/Affection); “*my mother goes out of her way to hurt my feelings*” (Hostility/Aggression); “*my mother ignores me as long as I do nothing to bother her*” (Indifference/Neglect); and “*my mother does not really love me*” (Undifferentiated rejection).

**Personality Assessment Questionnaire (PAQ; Naz & Kausar, 2011).** Urdu translated version of PAQ (Naz & Kausar, 2011 originally developed by Rohner & Khaleque, 2008) comprising 42 items self-report standardized measure of psychological adjustment for children which covers seven domains of personality that is, Aggression and Hostility, Dependency, Self-esteem, Self-adequacy, Emotional Responsiveness, Emotional Stability, and Negative Worldview. Out of the seven subscales, each subscale contains six item and responses are obtained on 4-point Likert type scale ranging from *almost always true* (4) to *almost never true* (1). High score on PAQ reflects higher level of psychological maladjustment and vice versa. Initially, factor structure of Child PAQ has been developed using Principal Component Analysis with oblique rotation, which culminates seven factors solution (Rohner, 1999). In order to establish internal consistency of PAQ, several studies have been conducted in the last couple of decades and reported alpha coefficients ranged from .70 to .96 (Rohner, 2004). Child PAQ has been translated into Urdu using standardized back translation procedure (Naz & Kausar, 2011) and is widely used measure of children’s psychological adjustment. For the current study, alpha coefficient for the child PAQ was found to be satisfactory (.70). Sample items are “*I think about fighting or being unkind* (Hostility)”; “*I feel I am no good and I will never be good* (Negative Self-esteem); “*I see life as full of danger* (Negative Worldview); and “*I have trouble making and keeping good friends*” (Emotional Unresponsiveness).

**Social Competence Scale for Children (SCSC; Shujja & Malik, 2011).** It is a 40-item indigenously developed self-report instrument (Shujja & Malik, 2011), which measures different dimensions of social competence in children (9-13 years). Principal Component Analysis with varimax rotation provides six factors

solution that are Self-control, Empathy and Helping Behavior, Social Skills and Obedience, Antisocial Behavior, Assertiveness, and Communication Skills. Respondents indicate their agreement on a 4-point scale and response options ranged from *never* (1) to *always* (4). Reverse scoring was used for the reverse items that is, 3, 5, 12, 15, 18, 21, 22, 23, 26, 27, 28, 29, 32, 36, and 39. High score on SCSC reflects high level of social competence and vice versa. SCSC has good psychometric properties as alpha coefficient for social competence scale was found to be satisfactory (.71) (Shujja & Malik, 2011). Sample items are “*Main mehnat krta hon* [I work hard]” (Social Skill & Obedience); “*Main larai krta hon* [I fight]” (Self-control & Aggression); “*Main waldain sy batain chuppany ki koshish krta hon* [I try to hide things from my parents]” (Communication Skills). For the current study, alpha coefficient of total SCSC was .75 and alpha coefficients for its subscales ranged from .71 (Antisocial Behavior) to .83 (Social Skills and Obedience)

## Procedure

Keeping the inclusion and exclusion a criterion in view, designated sample was approached with the help of school teachers in government and private schools of Lahore. The girls were asked about the status of their parents (step/real) on a demographic sheet and their self-reported information was cross-validated with their class teacher’s report. Thus, data were collected from only those girls who reported having either stepmother or stepfather and their class teachers confirmed this information. In order to comply with ethical standards, formal permission was sought from heads of the institutes and written informed consent was obtained from the girls. The informed consent included information regarding purpose and significance of the study, legal and moral rights of participants (e.g., rights regarding privacy and confidentiality, withdrawal from the study etc). Researchers personally contacted each participant and a set of three scales was administered on the designated sample. The data regarding demographic variables were obtained through demographic form specifically designed for the study. Each participant took 40-50 minutes to complete the dataset. The participants, school teachers, and heads were formally thanked for their cooperation.

## Results

The obtained data is subjected to initial screening for detecting any missing value or irregularity in the data. For this, missing value analysis is conducted which indicates no missing value in the data. Data entry had been done using PAR Score 6.0<sup>®</sup> (a specially designed software for the scoring of Child PARQ and Child PAQ) and SPSS 16<sup>®</sup>. Later, the PAR Score 6.0<sup>®</sup> data file is merged with SPSS 16<sup>®</sup> data file and further analysis is conducted in SPSS 16<sup>®</sup>. In order to view the inter-correlations among the study variables as function of step versus real parenting, correlation analysis is conducted.

Intercorrelations among study variables reveal that girl's perception about stepfather and mother rejection is positively correlated with their psychological maladjustment; while, social competence does not correlate with any of the study variables in stepfather-mother families. In stepmother-father families, girl's perception about stepmother rejection is positively correlated with their psychological maladjustment and social competence whereas social competence is negatively correlated with psychological maladjustment.

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics and Inter-correlations among Variables of the Present Study as Function of Parenting Types (N = 100)*

Source	1	2	3	4	M	SD
<b>Stepfather-Mother Families<sup>a</sup></b>						
1. Child PARQ-Stepfather	–	-.20	.30*	-.16	119.67	21.59
2. Child PARQ-Mother		–	.38**	-.25	120.78	25.67
3. PAQ			–	-.13	95.86	12.11
4. SCSC				–	112.67	9.01
<b>Stepmother-Father Families<sup>b</sup></b>						
1. Child PARQ-Father	–	.45**	.14	-.20	125.59	29.43
2. Child PARQ-Stepmother		–	.46**	-.32**	126.32	35.08
3. PAQ			–	-.52***	93.95	12.38
4. SCSC				–	122.59	13.32

Note. <sup>a</sup>n = 53; <sup>b</sup>n = 47. Child PARQ = Child Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire; PAQ = Personality Assessment Questionnaire; SCSC = Social Competence Scale for Children.

\* p < .05. \*\* p < .01. \*\*\* p < .001.

Independent sample *t*-tests are conducted to find out the difference between girls belonging to stepfather-mother families and those who belonged to stepmother-father families. There are nonsignificant differences on study variables except social competence. Girls who belong to stepmother-father families are found

to be more socially competent than their counterparts from stepfather-mother families with large effect size (Cohen's  $d = .87$ ).

Table 2

*Comparison of Mean Scores of Girls from Stepfather-Mother and Stepmother-Father Families on all Study Variables (N = 100)*

Variables	Sf-M Families (n = 47)		Sm-F Families (n = 53)		t(98)	p	95% CI		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
	Child PARQ Sf/F	119.67	21.54	125.59			29.46	0.99	
Child PARQ Sm/M	120.71	25.66	124.33	35.07	0.78	.43	-19.6 8.51	.18	
PAQ	95.86	12.15	93.95	12.30	0.68	.49	-3.66 7.48	.15	
SCSC	112.62	9.04	122.5	13.33	3.77	.00	+15.1 -4.6	.87	

*Note.* Sf-M = Stepfather-Mother; Sm-F = Stepmother-Father; Child PARQ Sf/F = Child Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire-Stepfather /Father; Child PARQ-Sm/M = Child Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire-Stepmother /Mother; PAQ = Personality Assessment Questionnaire; SC = Social Competence for Children.

Hierarchical regression analyses in Table 3 demonstrate that girl's perception about mother's rejection emerge as significant and positive predictor of girl's psychological maladjustment as the second model explains a unique variance of 22% in girls maladjustment. The third model accounts for a unique variance of 19% variance in determining girl's psychological maladjustment in stepfather-mother families after controlling demographic variables (child age, mother age, father age, mother education, and father education), which highlights that perceived stepfather rejection may increase girls' level of maladjustment. It is noteworthy that after the inclusion of perceived stepfather rejection in the third model, perceived maternal rejection becomes a stronger predictor.

In the stepmother-father families, the second model demonstrates that girl's perceived social competence negatively predicts their maladjustment and it accounts for 11% unique variance in the maladjustment level. In the third model, perception of stepmother rejection emerges as significant and positive predictor of psychological maladjustment in the accounting for 11% unique variance in psychological maladjustment of girls after controlling demographic variables mentioned above. Social competence emerged as significant predictor in second model, but inclusion of girl's perception of stepmother outweighed the predictive strength of social competence.

Table 3  
*Hierarchical Regression Analysis showing Predictive Role of Child's Perception about Parents and Social Competence for Psychological Adjustment among Girls*

Variables	Stepfather-Mother Families				Stepmother-Father Families			
	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\Delta R^2$	$\Delta F$	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\Delta R^2$	$\Delta F$
<b>I</b>								
Control variables <sup>a</sup>			.03	0.15			.26	2.07
<b>II</b>								
Control variables			.22	4.11**			.11	5.46**
Social Comp.	-.08	0.39			-.39*	2.28**		
Child PARQ-M	.52**	2.55**						
Child PARQ-F					.02	.14		
<b>III</b>								
Control variables			.19	9.22***			.11	7.24**
Social Comp.	.04	0.24			-.29	1.81		
Child PARQ-M	.71***	3.76***						
Child PARQ-Sf	.49**	3.03**						
Child PARQ-F					-.14	.89		
Child PARQ-Sm					.42**	2.69**		
$R^2$ Total	.45*				.49**			
<i>F</i>	2.38*				3.32**			

Note. <sup>a</sup>Control variables are child's age, mother's age, father's age, mother's education, father's education. Comp. = Competence; Child PARQ-M = Child Parental Acceptance Rejection Questionnaire-Mother; Child PARQ-F = Child Parental Acceptance Rejection Questionnaire-Father; Child PARQ-Sf = Child Parental Acceptance Rejection Questionnaire-Stepfather; Child PARQ-Sm = Parental Acceptance Rejection Questionnaire-Stepmother

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

### Discussion

The current study investigated role of step parenting in determining psychological maladjustment of girls in Pakistani culture. The dynamics of stepparent families are quite different from those of biological parent families, for example, children show positive attachment with their biological parents because they perceive their biological parent as caring, and trustworthy than stepparents (Golombok & Tasker, 2015; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). A unique contribution of the present study was that it exclusively focused on the influence of having a stepparent on children's maladjustment, social competence, and perceived parental rejection and it offered a comparative insight for understanding the potential differences that a stepfather or a stepmother could make in children's personality, social

competence, and perceived parental rejection. Furthermore, the sample of the present study comprised of girls only. Boys were not included in the sample of the present study because pertinent literature suggests that girls constitute a more vulnerable population for experiencing higher levels of perceived parental rejection in families having a stepparent; which may hinder the development and consequently they are less likely to be socially competent and adjusted (Dunn, 2002; Dunn et al., 2001; O' Connor et al., 2001). As anticipated, stepfather and mother's rejection was found to be significantly and positively correlated with psychological maladjustment but relationship between stepfather rejection and mother's rejection remained negative, but nonsignificant for girls in stepfather-mother families.

In the stepmother-father families, perception of stepmother rejection was found to be significantly and negatively correlated with social competence but positively correlated with psychological maladjustment. Findings are partially consistent with existing literature as stepparents contribute more negatively in psychosocial adjustment and life satisfaction of children than biological parents specifically for the girls (Bray & Berger, 1993; Ferri & Smith, 1998; Hetherington, 1993; Vuchinich, 1991). Unlike girl's perception about stepmother-father rejection, there was meaningful reciprocal relationship between girls' perception about mother's rejection and stepfather's rejection. The reason may be that girls are usually more possessive in their relationship with parents and entry of stepfather is likely to be unacceptable. Therefore, in accordance with the stepfamily researchers' claim (e.g., Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington, 1993); girls' perception towards their stepfathers was more negative than their perception towards their biological mother. Girls start to perceive their biological mother as rejecting in the presence of stepfather. In Pakistani culture, fathers are rarely involved in child rearing and active parenting as compared to mothers and they strive to fulfill financial responsibilities. Children (specifically girls) are more attached with their biological mothers and entry of stepfather may threaten mother-child relationship as mothers start spending more time with stepfather rather than their children or conflict of interest between children and stepfathers may emerge. These abrupt changes in mother-child relationship may lead children to perceive their mothers as rejecting too.

Although stepparents are stereotypically perceived in negative manner and entry of stepparents is likely to contribute negatively in psychosocial adjustment of children, yet social competence has been reported as an important element in psychosocial adjustment of

children who live with stepparents. Studies reported that social competent children are more likely to adjust with stepparents and reestablish conflict-free relationship with stepparents shortly after the remarriage of biological parents (Hetherington, 1999; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Findings of our study revealed that social competence was more strongly correlated with girls' perception of stepmother rejection and their psychological maladjustment in stepmother-father families than in stepfather-mother families. Girls mostly stay in home and spent much of their time with stepmother than stepfather. Social competent girls may be more adaptive and socially skilled in managing relationship with stepparents, especially stepmothers. These findings are partially consistent with existing literature, as social competence has found to be significantly related with stepmother rejection and psychological adjustment for the girls who live in stepmother-father families. Literature related to step parenting reported the social competence is associated with step and real parent-child relationship (Golombok & Tasker, 2015). Because of day-to-day interaction of girls with stepmother, girls need higher level of social competence in order to maintain effective stepmother-stepdaughter relationship. To substantiate the findings, *t*-test demonstrates that girls living in stepmother-father families were found to be more socially competent than their counterparts living in stepfather-mother families.

It was also hypothesized that girls' perception of stepmother rejection and their social competence would emerge as stronger predictor of girls' psychological maladjustment than their perception of mother, father, and stepfather rejection and their social competence. Hierarchical regression revealed that girls' perception of mother rejection significantly predicted girls' psychological maladjustment but this predictive relationship became stronger after the inclusion of stepfather. The girls' perception of increased mother rejection after entrance of stepfather in the family indicates strong reservations regarding stepfather-mother relationships. Girls may perceive their stepfathers as rival in mother-daughter relationship or a partner of mother who has legal right to mother's time, love, attention, and care. Therefore, perceived maternal rejection became more salient predictive factor after the incorporation of stepfather rejection in the model of maladjustment.

In the stepmother-father families, data reported social competence as significant predictor in second step but social competence did not remain significant after the inclusion of stepmothers' rejection in the model. Girls perceived their stepmothers as more rejecting than real-fathers and these findings are consistent

with researches conducted on American (Fine, 1986) and Australian sample (Planitz & Feeney, 2009). Girls perceived their stepmothers as more controlling than their fathers and continuous co-living with stepmother lead the girls to covert aggression even though they are socially competent. They are likely to absorb aggression or any other negative feeling and show adaptive behavior towards stepmother. This may be due to their early childhood socialization done by their biological parents. Furthermore, since social competence lost its significant role in the prediction of maladjustment after the incorporation of maternal rejection in the model, it is quite plausible that perceived maternal rejection may mediate the negative relationship between social competence and maladjustment. Further research is warranted to explore the mediation potential of perceived maternal rejection between social competence and maladjustment among girls.

### **Limitations and Suggestions**

The current study has attempted to answer some important questions regarding the role of step and real parenting and social competence in determining the psychological adjustment of children, but sample was limited to few schools of Lahore city. Furthermore, the sample comprised of girls only and it had not been compared with children having both real parents. Future research may include complex stepmother-father families, divorced families, single-parent families, and intact families (with both real parents) as comparison groups within indigenous cultural context. It may enrich our understanding of development of social competence and personality of children if future studies may compare children with both real parents, both stepparents, and one stepparent. Furthermore, although girls are more vulnerable to the negative consequences of perceived parental rejection in stepparent families, yet future studies should include boys as a comparative group in order to understand the factors behind boys' resilience in coping with the negative consequences of step parenting and perceived parental rejection. Secondly, current study has focused on children's perspective and common method variance restricts us to generalize the finding without understanding parents' perspective. It would be good if someone conduct mix method study using multi-informants so that chance of common method variance could be reduced.

## Conclusion and Implications

In short, girls living in stepfather-mother families perceived their mothers more rejecting than stepfathers whereas, in stepmother-father families, only stepmothers were perceived as significantly rejecting. Despite of equal level of psychological adjustment, girls who belonged to stepmother-father families were more socially competent than their counterparts who belonged to stepfather-mother families. Last but not the least, perception of stepfather and mothers' rejection significantly predicted, but social competence did not predict psychological adjustment of girls in stepfather-mother families. In the stepmother-father families, girls' perception of stepmother rejection and social competence significantly predicted psychological adjustment. The findings of current study can provide useful guideline for child psychologists, family and marriage counselors, and clinicians. For instance, child psychologists may enhance social competence of step-adolescents and help the step-adolescents and stepparents to bridge the communication gap in order to make them understand the roles and needs of each other. On the other hand, family and marriage counselors may devise intervention for the stepparents that could help them adjust with stepchildren and stepfamilies by reducing emotional and psychological barriers between themselves and the stepchildren/stepfamilies. By understanding the psychological maladjustment and its contributory psychosocial factors, clinicians may help the potential victims through individual therapies such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).

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