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An Intergroup Perspective on Stepchildren's Communication with their Nonresidential Parent's Family

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AN INTERGROUP PERSPECTIVE ON
STEPCHILDREN’S COMMUNICATION WITH THEIR NONRESIDENTIAL
PARENT’S FAMILY

Rebecca DiVerniero

University of Nebraska, 2010

Advisor: Professor Dawn O. Braithwaite

Communicating and negotiating boundaries can be a challenge to family members who have experienced a divorce and remarriage. In particular, stepchildren and their nonresidential parent’s family must manage potential changes and challenges to their communication and relationship as the stepchild transitions into stepfamily life. Centered in the interpretive paradigm and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), the researcher interviewed 29 current and former stepchildren about their transition into stepfamily life to address six research questions: (1) What are the turning points in stepchildren’s communication with their nonresidential parent’s family? (2) How do stepchildren perceive and describe family identification with their nonresidential parent’s family during each turning point? (3) How, if at all, do stepchildren accommodate their communication in interactions with their nonresidential parent’s family members over time? (4) What are stepchildren’s motivations for accommodating, or not, in interactions with their nonresidential parent’s family members over time? (5) How, if at all, do
stepchildren, in interactions with their nonresidential parent’s family, perceive their family members are accommodating over time? (6) How do stepchildren, in interactions with their nonresidential parent’s family’s, perceive their family’s motivations for accommodating, or not, over time? This research highlights the complexity of managing familial roles in the face of change. Findings indicated that, first, family members must negotiate new boundaries and roles as the stepchild transitions into stepfamily life. Second, a turning point analysis illustrated how and why stepchildren categorized their family members in terms of group membership over time. Third, the stepchildren used discourse management and interpersonal control to accommodate in their communication with the nonresidential parent’s family, and the nonresidential parent’s family used discourse management, interpersonal control, and interpretability. Fourth, the participants and the nonresidential parent’s family used these strategies to achieve their desired social distance with each other. Implications of the findings are discussed for the study of intergroup communication, CAT, the stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family relationship, and for practitioners. Directions for future research are also addressed.
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CHAPTER ONE: ARGUMENT FOR THE PRESENT STUDY

Introduction and Rationale

Stepfamilies, once considered a “nontraditional” family form, have become more of a presence (Ganong & Coleman 1994; 2004; Schrod, Baxter, McBride, Braithwaite, & Fine, 2006). The most recent American census data on stepfamilies suggests that with a steady divorce rate of approximately 50%, coupled with almost 75% of single parents remarrying following divorce or spousal death, at least one-third of Americans are members of a stepfamily (Stepfamily Association of America, 1998). Data from the 2001 Survey of Income and Program Participation further shows that 15% of children under the age of 18 are living in a married stepfamily, and one in 10 households with children are stepfamily households (Stewart, 2007). There is a continued need to understand this expanding familial structure due to their growing presence and the unique challenges they face (Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001; Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000). No longer can scholars confine their investigations to the context of traditional nuclear families and hope to generalize to the larger population (Floyd & Mormon, 2006).

Since the 1970s, when divorce became the main reason stepfamilies formed, family scholars turned their focus to this growing structure in order to understand the intricacies and complexities of stepfamily life (Coleman et al., 2000; Ganong & Coleman, 1994; 2004; Visher & Visher, 1979). Communication scholars began pursuing questions about stepfamily interaction, beginning in the 1990s with a study by Cissna, Cox, and Bochner (1990), and followed by active programs of scholarship which focused
Communication scholars have especially focused their research on the family’s early years of development and on the communication in the stepchild and stepparent relationship within the immediate stepfamily home (e.g., Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004; Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998; DiVerniero, 2005). However, scholars cannot fully understand stepfamily communication without also looking outside the immediate household to the stepfamily’s social and familial network (Bray, 1994b). Floyd and Morman (2006) argued that, “However important marital and parental relationships are to the human social agenda…they represent only a narrow slice of the family experience,” (p. xiv). The extended family in particular, such as grandparents, uncles, and aunts, plays an important role in the immediate stepfamily’s lives (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999). For example, extended family members may be relied on for monetary needs (Dilworth-Anderson, 1992) and may contribute to the children’s value and beliefs (Kornhaber, 1985). After a divorce and remarriage of the residential parent, the nonresidential parent’s side of the family may continue to influence the immediate stepfamily’s lives as well (Baxter et al., 1999; DiVerniero, 2007a; 2007b; Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

The approval or disapproval of the new stepfamily by the extended family members is an important turning point in the stepfamily’s development (Baxter et al., 1999). During this transition, stepfamily members may contend with new questions of relational boundaries and how to interact with this side of the family (DiVerniero, 2007b; Schmeckle, 2001). This may be challenging for all family members, yet research has
shown that stepchildren may find it especially hard to adjust to their new stepfamily life (Bray & Berger, 1993). Stepchildren may not desire the change and, unlike their residential parent, they are still blood and/or legally related to the nonresidential parent’s family, potentially making relational boundary concerns more salient for them (Bray & Berger, 1993). DiVerniero (2007b) reported that stepchildren found the process of negotiating familial boundaries and determining how to communicate with their nonresidential parent’s side of the family awkward and anxiety causing. She also found that stepchildren were uncertain as to whether their nonresidential parent’s family members still considered them part of the family after the stepchild’s residential parent remarried (DiVerniero, 2007b). My general purpose of this dissertation project was to better understand communication between stepfamily members and those in the extended family, in particular with members of the nonresidential parent’s family.

One way to understand families is via an analysis of family boundaries, or shared family identity; looking at who is and is not considered to be a member of the family (Stewart, 2005). A number of scholars have begun to examine the family through an intergroup approach to better understand how family members categorize one another in terms of group membership (Banker & Gaertner, 1998; Soliz, 2007). Within the context of stepfamilies, researchers using an intergroup lens can highlight the intergroup distinctions and communication which may surround the transition into stepfamily life and throughout their development (Banker & Gaertner, 1998; Soliz, 2007). Being able to understand stepfamily members’ categorical perceptions of ingroups (“they are like me”) and outgroups (“they are different than me”) can help us understand the perceived shared family identity and communication in these families. Scholars have found that intergroup
distinctions are not restricted to the immediate stepfamily household (Soliz, 2007). Rather, stepchildren may experience intergroup communication with their extended family as well (Soliz, 2007). Although there are exceptions, researchers have shown that in general, intergroup and interpersonal communication are negatively related (Harwood, Giles, & Palomares, 2005). This means that the more salient intergroup distinctions become, the less likely the communicators will be to acknowledge the others’ unique characteristics (Harwood et al., 2005). Thus, there is a need to examine stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family interactions and how, if at all, intergroup distinctions impact communication over time. My central purpose in the present study was to explore how stepchildren perceive the salience of intergroup distinctions between themselves and the nonresidential parent’s family, as well as how stepchildren communicatively manage these interactions over time. To accomplish this, in the present study I investigated the relational turning points retrospectively viewed by stepchildren as events that shaped intergroup distinctions in their relationships with their nonresidential parent’s family members.

In the remainder of Chapter One, I first develop an argument regarding why stepchild and the nonresidential parent’s family interactions are a suitable context to study intergroup communication in the family. Second, I describe relevant aspects of my pilot study as it informed the argument for the focus of the dissertation. Third, I explain why Communication Accommodation Theory was the most appropriate theory to guide my study and how a turning point analysis allowed me to investigate how stepchildren and their nonresidential parent’s family might accommodate over time in their interactions with each other. The conclusion of Chapter One includes the research
questions guiding the present study. To begin, I discuss the impact of the extended family on the immediate family’s life and why their relationship was an appropriate context to study intergroup communication within the family.

**Salience of the Extended Family**

A first goal of the present study was to look beyond the immediate stepfamily household. Researchers have found that interaction with the social network contributes to how much or little stepfamily members feel like a family in the immediate household (Baxter et al., 1999). Thus, it is not only the immediate stepfamily’s communication which impacts their perceptions of one another or their interactions. In the following section I argue further for the importance of viewing families as a system, in which each part impacts the others, as well as argue the interdependence of the extended family in particular to the immediate nuclear family’s life, after a divorce, and after a remarriage.

**Systems and Social Networks**

Relationships are not created in a vacuum (Boss, 2002). Each is developed, maintained, and terminated within the context of family, community, social groupings, and the world (Wilmot, 1995). Every one of our personal relationships is embedded in a larger social network or relationship constellation; an influential group of people who we know and interact with, who create the social context of our lives (Parks, 2007). These individuals influence, at least to some level, our socialization of relational expectations, rules, norms, and rituals. They influence who we will meet and develop relationships with in the future, as well as how we communicate and manage interactions with others around us (Bochner & Eisenberg, 1987; Parks, 1995; 2007). Our social network also impacts how we view the world, our beliefs, our values, and our actions. The salience of
social networks in our day-to-day lives led Parks (1995) to argue for more research focusing outside dyadic relationships to the interactions surrounding it. He recently contended:

Just as selves do not exist apart from relationships, relationships do not exist apart from other relationships; that is, from networks…Networks are not merely a way of linking relationships together. Networks are the living tissue of culture and social structure. (Parks, 2007, p. 38-39)

Thus, recognizing families as part of a social network, or a system, is an important part of understanding their communication (Bochner & Eisenberg, 1987; Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967). Researchers using a systems framework highlight that relationships do not occur in isolation, that there are outside influences impacting dyadic relationships (Galvin, Dickson, & Marrow, 2006). Using this framework also illustrates how every part of a system, in this case family systems, is interdependent. Members of a system are closely related, in that if one part changes, it will cause a change in all parts (Watzlawick et al., 1967). Scholars using a systems framework acknowledge that interactions are complex, in that actions take place as a response to past events, and are stimuli for future events (Duncan & Rock, 1993). In the present study, I asked stepchildren to describe communication with their nonresidential parent’s family and their immediate family over time, with the intention of bringing the interdependence of the extended and immediate family relationships to light.

Therapists have used the systems perspective to recognize the importance of including family members in what used to be individual therapy (Parks, 2007; Watzlawick et al., 1967). These practitioners recognized that no individual can be
understood on their own, or outside of their relational context. Empirical work by communication researchers has supported the importance of the systems framework and recognition of social networks (e.g., Baxter, Braithwaite, & Bryant, 2006; Braithwaite, McBride, & Schrod, 2003; Parks, 1995; 2007; Tianyi & Adler-Baeder, 2007). For instance, participants in romantic relationships feel closer, more committed, and communicate more frequently when they also have greater amounts of contact with the members of each other’s personal networks, and when they believe that network members support the primary relationship (Parks, 2007). Perceptions of support for the primary relationship will promote positive interactions with the partner’s network, as well as with one another. In contrast, if one of the partner’s families does not support the relationship, it can result in stress, loyalty conflicts, and negative interactions with both their family and their partner (Parks, 1995). Even if a relationship terminates, people are still often connected (Graham, 1997; Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, & Cheng, 2008). Thus, the social network plays an important role in our daily lives as well as during relational transitions. The same holds true in stepfamilies (Braithwaite et al., 2003). Braithwaite and her colleagues (2003) argued that stepfamilies are not sequestered to one household, and stepfamily researchers should take into account how potentially influential individuals, such as the nonresidential parent, impact the stepchildren’s lives. In the present study, I built on their work by examining the communication between stepchildren and the nonresidential parent’s family. I expand on the role of the extended family in the immediate family’s life in the next section.
Extended Family Influences

As a network, the family is a group of people by whom we are “heavily impacted,” (Wilmot, 1995, p.5). Some family scholars have explored social networks by focusing on interactions with extended family members, arguing that families do not consist of simply two parents and their children. Extended family members such as aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and in-laws are important factors in understanding the family experience (Milardo, 2005; Perlesz et al., 2006). Extended family can impact the quality of interaction and access family members have to one another (Floyd & Morman, 2006). They may also be available to provide emotional support to the family (Pann & Crosbie-Burnett, 2005), be relied on for monetary needs or child care (Dilworth-Anderson, 1992; Uttal, 1999), sought out for advice (Milardo, 2005), or even influence the beliefs and values of the immediate family (Kornhaber, 1985). Parents’ integration with their social network, such as the extended family, can even impact their level of success at raising their children (Schmeeckle & Sprecher, 2004). Children’s interaction with any of the extended family provides new and different sources of experiences and resources. Other relatives’ involvement is positively related to the mother’s satisfaction, responsiveness to the child, positive mother and child interactions, and social and academic adjustment of the child (Schmeeckle & Sprecher, 2004). Whether positive or negative, or a bit of both, the extended family’s presence or absence plays an important role in the lives of the immediate family members (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001; Johnson, 1985; Kornhaber, 1985; Milardo, 2005). Thus, it is also important to learn more about the extended family’s interactions with the children after the family-of-origin
dissolves and the residential parent’s new stepfamily begins to develop, which I did for the present study.

Further evidence of the interdependence between the immediate and extended family can be found within scholars’ growing work on three types of extended family relationships. First, in-law relationships have been shown to affect the married couple significantly, both positively and negatively (Morr, 2003). Bryant et al. (2001) found that if partners have emotional and psychological loyalties to their own individual families, then conflict between their spouse and their families can create hostility and stress between the married couple. Thus, even though interactions with the in-laws may be much less frequent than communication between the couple, they are still influential. In fact, even in long-term marriages, conflicts with the extended family are negatively related to marital stability, satisfaction, and commitment over time (Bryant et al., 2001).

In a separate study, researchers found that married men sharing households with their mothers-in-law were more likely to report consequences such as interference in their social lives, family vacation plans, and time with the immediate family, as well as other extended family members (Kleban, Brody, Schoonover, & Hoffman, 1989).

Second, the impact of interaction with extended family on the immediate family’s life can also be seen in the grandparent and grandchild relationship. For example, Kornhaber (1985) argued that grandparents may be the most influential family members in their grandchildren’s lives, with the exception of the parents. Specifically, Kornhaber (1985) found that children who held a close relationship with their grandparents were more likely to indicate a deep connection to their family as a whole. Grandparents are the most important in transmitting family history and reinforcing family identity (Kornhaber
& Woodward, 1981). Finally, evidence of extended family interdependence comes in the form of aunts and uncles. Aunts are second only to grandmothers in kin who voluntarily serve as foster caregivers. Aunts also frequently engage in family storytelling, which defines the family, and provides a view of the world for listeners (Floyd & Morman, 2006; Stone, 2000; Wilmot, 1995). Uncles may offer problem-solving advice, serve as role models for nephews, or act as surrogate fathers if the father is absent (Milardo, 2005). Like aunts, they may relate stories to their nieces and nephews about their family history, which can help children better understand their parents as individuals. They can also serve as buffers between the children and the parents, advocating for the child, or attempting to explain a parent’s decision more clearly (Klein & Milardo, 2000). In the present study I extended the literature on extended family relationships by focusing on the stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family’s interactions. Despite the dissolution of the family-of-origin, the nonresidential parent’s family still has potential to impact the child’s life, though their relationship with the child may change due to the divorce (Johnson, 1985), which I discuss in the next section.

**Effects of Divorce on Child and Extended Family Relationships**

After the dissolution of a marriage, members of the extended familial network may feel confused as to how to communicate with the divorced immediate family (Johnson, 1985). And yet, they may continue to be an important source for social support since children of divorce may choose to look outside the immediate family for these needs (Barth, 2004; Soliz, 2008). The children’s parents may be unavailable because they have their own new challenges, such as managing their lives as a single parent and negotiating how to communicate with their ex-spouse. If there are multiple children
involved, competing loyalties toward the parents may contribute to conflict in this relationship, potentially leading children to turn to their extended kin for support (Gano-Phillips & Fincham, 1995; Soliz, 2008). In any family, extended kin relationships with the children are largely determined by the parents, and extended kin do not freely choose their role in the family by themselves (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). These individuals, like the children involved, rarely have any agency over whether or not the divorce occurs, the post-divorce parenting relationship, and practices of the parents (e.g. Schrodt et al., 2006). The extended kin’s contact with the children post-divorce may be limited by geographic distance, and/or mediated by the residential parent, and/or the stepparent (Doka & Mertz, 1988; Johnson, 1988). The nonresidential parent may become less of a presence in their child’s life as well, which could establish another barrier to the maintenance of the extended family’s relationship with the child (Furstenberg & Harris, 1992).

Grandparent and grandchild relationships after a divorce have received a great amount of attention from scholars, potentially due to the claim that grandparents are second only to parents in their influence on the children (Kornhaber, 1985). Researchers have found that during family transitions of any kind, grandparents frequently assist their grandchildren in adjusting to the changes. How to give this support to grandchildren during their children’s divorce process may be unclear for grandparents (Johnson 1985). Despite this ambiguous role, Soliz (2008) was able to develop a typology of the potential communicative paths grandparents might take in supporting their grandchildren after a divorce. He discovered six nonexclusive categories of support. First, the empathetic grandmother provided emotional support, nurturing the grandchildren through “just being
there” and being open-minded without solicitation. Second, stable generation supporters are grandparents who acted normal, and let grandchildren know things won’t change in their relationship, despite the changes going on in other parts of their lives. Third, peacekeepers actively maintained their relationships with their former son- or daughter-in-law, and spoke positively about them, which can ameliorate some of the stress between the two sides of the family. Fourth, the straightforward grandfather utilized tough love through unsolicited attempts to help the grandchild realize they cannot change the situation. Fifth, family historian supporters spoke to the grandchild about what was happening in an attempt to explain why the divorce occurred. Sixth, parent supporter grandparents were able to help the entire immediate family by assisting their own child, which in turn indirectly helped their grandchildren. Clearly, the grandparents’ response to the divorce has an impact on the child, as well as the entire familial network.

There may be roadblocks to grandparents’ communication with their grandchildren after a divorce as well. Soliz (2008) also identified four barriers to grandparent support following a divorce. First, the grandparent may be absent for a variety of reasons, such as they live far away or the grandchildren do not know them well to begin with. Second, critical grandparents speak down about the divorce itself or their child’s former spouse in front of the grandchild. Third, an incapacitated grandparent has mental or physical limitations, which keeps them from helping. Fourth, a silent grandparent completely avoids discussions regarding the divorce, refusing to talk about it with their grandchildren at all. While Soliz (2008) asked participants to report on all their grandparents, and not just their nonresidential parent’s side of the family, it is clear that
even after a divorce, the extended family network plays a salient role in the children’s lives.

Less is known about the children and their nonresidential parent’s family relationships exclusively, which was my focus in the present study. Lopata (1979) argued that negotiating these relationships may be a greater challenge for children of divorce than children who lose a parent to death, at least before a remarriage occurs. She argued that in post-bereavement single parent families, because there are no custody battles or split loyalties, which may be part of a divorce process, bereaved children may have less difficulty maintaining relationships with extended kin. It is likely that the widowed parent will receive a great deal of social support from their own kin, as well as their deceased spouse’s kin. In contrast, divorced parents receive little, if any, support from their former in-laws (Lopata, 1979). Yet, while the nonresidential parent and their side of the family may be less of a presence in their children’s lives after a divorce, this is not necessarily the “end” of the relationship with them (Lambert, 2007). The nonresidential parent’s side of the family is still a potential source of influence on the child’s life after the divorce as well. Bray (1994a) argued that continued interaction with the nonresidential parent and their family after the divorce leads to better outcomes for the child. Therefore, I focused on the nonresidential parent’s family exclusively in order to learn more about how their relationship with the children is renegotiated over time and during transitional periods. In the next section, I argue that the remarriage of the residential parent is one important transitional period for study of the child and nonresidential parent’s family relationship, which I examined in this dissertation.
Effects of Remarriage on Child and Extended Family Relationships

Although relationships between the residential and nonresidential households may be strained after a divorce, things may become even more challenging after the addition of a stepparent to the residential family (Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001). For instance, the stepchild may struggle with accepting the new stepparent, worried that it would be disloyal to their nonresidential parent (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Given the interdependence of family systems (Bochner & Eisenberg, 1987), it is likely this tension will also affect relationships with the extended family members as well. Despite evidence illustrating the salience of extended family, researchers examining remarriage have tended to focus narrowly on communication in the immediate residential stepfamily, ignoring outside influences (Braithwaite et al., 1998; Bray, 1994b). Researchers who have focused outside the remarriage household tended to concentrate on co-parenting (e.g., Braithwaite et al., 2003; Madden-Derdich, Leonard, & Christopher, 1999; Miller, 2007; Schrodt et al., 2006). Even when the residential parent remarries, the kinkeepers of the nonresidential parent’s family, the individuals who keep family members informed of one another and rituals intact (Leach & Braithwaite, 1996), may play a role in maintaining a relationship with the stepchild (Bray, 1994b). In fact, Bray (1994b) argued that researchers should take into account the residential stepfamily, the nonresidential parent, and the nonresidential parent’s family in order to better assess the immediate stepfamily’s interactions. Thus, regardless of the new entity of the stepfamily, researchers should still view the entire family network as a system in which each member reciprocally influences and is influenced by other family members, whose relationships
change over time, and who are influenced by the development of the stepfamily (Bray & Berger, 1993).

Baxter et al. (1999) found evidence regarding the interdependence of stepfamilies and the nonresidential parent’s family in their turning point study on stepfamilies. They discovered stepfamily members reported that the presence or absence of the nonresidential parent’s family played an important role in the interactions within the immediate stepfamily. Stepfamily members indicated that positive interactions with their social networks, which included the nonresidential parent’s kin, served as validation of their stepfamily relationships. There may be potentially challenging influences as well, such as if the nonresidential parent’s family speaks negatively about the stepchild’s residential parent or new stepparent (DiVerniero, 2007b). Visher and Visher (1996) argued that grandparents in particular might play an important role in a satisfying stepfamily life. They may assist the stepfamily by accepting the remarriage and offer help when needed. Grandparents can also criticize the new stepparent, take sides when there are conflicts between the former spouses, or refuse to accept the new relationship. Thus, not only are these relationships important for the children, but also for the stepfamily’s overall well-being.

Stepchildren may need to negotiate unique challenges with their nonresidential parent’s kin, who might not hold a communicative script, expectations prescribed by society, for how to respond to a divorce and remarriage (Johnson, 1985). The stepchildren may contend with determining whether and how the nonresidential parent’s family wants to continue a familial relationship, since they may be less of a presence in the stepchild’s life, or may have misgivings about the residential parent and their
remarriage, and what type of relationship they want to have (Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987). In a study on dialectical tensions surrounding stepchild and extended stepfamily interactions, participants indicated that they felt resentful of their new stepfamily and extended stepfamily for causing them to miss out on their nonresidential parent’s family’s lives (DiVerniero, 2007a). The nonresidential parent’s family, though still blood and/or legally related, may also face barriers in their attempts to continue a relationship with the stepchild, particularly if the residential parent moves them away, has a poor relationship with the nonresidential parent, or if the residential parent’s remarriage takes time away from the nonresidential parent’s family’s traditions to make time to work on the new family’s development (DiVerniero, 2007a; 2007b; Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984).

Braithwaite et al. (1998) argued that stepfamilies “do not want to give up all aspects of the old family, yet, in many cases, they need to deal with the fact that the old family can be a threat to the new one,” (p. 114). This is evidenced by stepchildren’s reported reluctance to discuss their new stepfamily with their nonresidential parent (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006), or to discuss their nonresidential parent and extended kin with their new stepfamily (DiVerniero, 2007b). Examination of stepchildren’s perceptions of family boundaries, who belongs and who does not, can help us better understand stepchildren’s communication inside and outside the home as they transition into stepfamily life. In the next section, I argue in greater detail about the salience of boundary perceptions and management in the stepfamily and extended family that are central to the purpose of the present study.
Negotiating Familial Boundaries

All families experience ambiguous boundaries and roles in their family life cycle (Boss, 2002). Ambiguity becomes more likely during times of transition, such as when children move out of the home, or, in the case of the present study, when the family-of-origin dissolves and one or more of the parents remarry (Stewart, 2005). Learning to clarify family boundaries after a loss or acquisition of a family member is one of the most critical developmental tasks required of families during the life cycle (Boss, 1980). In this section, I contend that the complexities of stepfamily structure may contribute to the ambiguity surrounding family roles and expectations both within and outside of the stepfamily home, as well as argue for the importance of learning how stepchildren perceive their familial boundaries with the nonresidential parent’s family in order to help researchers better understand stepchildren’s interactions with that side of the family.

Becoming a Stepfamily

There are many roads to stepfamily life. In fact, Ganong and Coleman (1994) estimated that there are at least 15 types of stepfamily forms. Thus, not all stepfamilies are alike, but come in many shapes and sizes. The following four categories are just some of the potential ways stepfamilies may come together. First, they may consist of a simple structure, in which only one parent brings children into the stepfamily, or complex, in which both parents bring children with them into the remarriage (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Second, all members of the stepfamily may live together, or some of the children may alternate between households (Stewart, 2001). Third, the stepfamily may be first marriage, in which the family-of-origin parents were never married, they can be a cohabitating stepfamily, where the residential parent lives with but does not marry a
partner who is not their children’s biological parent, or the new partners may have been divorced and remarried multiple times (Lambert, 2007). Finally, stepfamilies can form after a divorce or after the death of a parent (Bryant, 2003).

Researchers have found that how often the children of divorce see their extended family is often related to how frequently they see their nonresidential parent (Doka & Mertz, 1988). Thus, in the present study, it was important to understand the story of the participants’ family-of-origin dissolution, and what their relationship with their nonresidential parent was like. There are five general ways the nonresidential parent may be involved, or not, in their child’s life. These situations may overlap or change over time. First, the family-of-origin parents may share equal custody, in which the children spend exactly half their time with one parent, and half with the other (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Second, a more frequent occurrence is when children reside primarily with one parent, who becomes their residential guardian, and the nonresidential parent keeps the children for shorter parts of the year (Donnelly & Finkelhor, 1993; Heinlein & Kozlowski, 2001). Third, some former spouses choose to co-parent, which means both parents are involved in decision making about their children’s lives (Ahrons, 1994). While this does not mean they must interact frequently, it does involve some level of communication between them and interaction with the child by each parent. Fourth, the nonresidential parent may gradually reduce contact with their children over time because they feel they have less of a voice in decisions regarding their children or, after the residential parent remarries, they feel that continuing a relationship with the children would be confusing for the children (Seltzer, 1991). They believe that the children cannot handle having two fathers or mothers, so they choose to bow out and let the stepfamily
develop and the stepparent be their new parental figure. Fifth, nonresidential parents may never have been much, or any, of a presence in their children’s lives before or after the divorce and remarriage occurred.

In the present study, I limited my focus to children of post-divorce stepfamilies, and did not include post-bereavement stepfamilies, for two reasons. First, researchers have found that post-bereavement families, while still worthy of examination, comprise a very small amount of stepfamilies (Bryant, 2003; DiVerniero, 2005; 2007b; Schrodt, 2005). Although census data does not document the amount of any type of stepfamily, Schrodt (2005) found that 10.9% of stepchildren participants in his study reported having a deceased biological parent, though they did not indicate whether the death occurred before or after stepfamily formation. In interviews with 22 participants, DiVerniero (2007b) found that approximately 13% of them were in post-bereavement stepfamilies. Bryant (2003) was able to collect an entire participant pool of 22 post-bereavement stepchildren. However, she reported that only approximately two percent of the American population have experienced the loss of a parent and remarriage of the surviving parent before reaching adulthood, making this population rare (Tellerman, Chernoff, Grossman, & Adams, 1998).

Second, although post-bereavement stepchildren may also contend with uncertainties in communicating with their deceased parent’s family after the death and remarriage, researchers have argued that these individuals contend with unique challenges from post-divorce stepchildren (Bryant, 2001; 2003; DiVerniero, 2005). As already discussed, when a parental death occurs, the widowed parent will likely receive support from their own extended family as well as their deceased partner’s family. This is
not frequently the case when a divorce occurs (Lopata, 1979). Further, the transition into stepfamily life may be somewhat smoother for post-bereavement stepfamilies, in part because there is clearly no chance for the family-of-origin parents to reunite, potentially allowing the stepchildren to accept the stepparent more easily (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1997).

The complexity of stepfamily structure has the potential to offer additional challenges to stepchildren, who must communicatively negotiate these new and complicated relationships, which are often ambiguous (Stewart, 2005). It is up to those involved to determine how each member of the stepfamily fits, or does not fit, into the new entity. This may hold true for the stepchild and the nonresidential parent’s family. Despite their history, once a remarriage occurs, clear role expectations for extended family are most often lacking, which can lead to stress and anxiety (Johnson, 1985). Learning how stepchildren define “family,” and how that definition may change over time, can serve as a window into stepfamily life in the present study.

**Defining Family Roles**

Ganong, Coleman, and Fine (2004) argued that among the critical issues that need to be managed after a remarriage is boundary management; the dynamic nature of deciding who does and who does not count as “family” (Boss, 2002). Family scholars themselves have conflicting views on what “family” means (Floyd, Mikkelson, & Judd, 2006). Floyd and his colleagues (2006) identified three lenses in particular which researchers have used to better understand family communication. First, those using the biogenetic lens define “family” as people who are able to contribute to procreation or who share genetic material. Anyone individuals are genetically related to, whose genes
may be passed on when they have children, and anyone they marry, who can help them have their own kin would qualify as “family.” Second, researchers using the sociolegal lens recognize legally sanctioned relationships as family (Floyd et al., 2006). Individuals who are legally bound to one another are considered family through this lens. However, this lens may not account for many of our relationships which we consider to be family, such as a best friend or lifelong family friend. Finally, researchers using a role lens believe that relationships are familial “to the extent that relational partners feel and act like family,” (Floyd et al., 2006, p. 27). Using this lens would promote the idea that relationships are discourse dependent; that it is not blood or legality that makes someone family. Rather, family is constituted in communication and emotional attachments and behavior patterns define family, not genetics or legality (Floyd et al., 2006; Galvin, 2006).

How a family researcher chooses to frame their study and who they include as participants clearly has implications and consequences for their findings. And yet, the researcher’s definition of family is not the only one of importance in the process of better understanding familial communication. The participants’ view is salient as well. It may affect how they choose to answer questions and what family members they discuss in interviews. Therefore, if we truly want to understand the family, we need to understand our participants’ perceptions of shared family identity with others and how those distinctions impact and are impacted by communication. Three recent studies answered this call, asking stepfamily members to discuss their perceptions of shared family identity in a variety of ways. First, in a study on the immediate stepfamily, Lambert (2008) found that stepchildren had a variety of reasons for determining whether or not their stepparent
was “family.” Some stepchildren stated that they only saw their stepparent as family because they were married to the family-of-origin parent, were living with them, and/or had children with their family-of-origin parent. Other reasons still cited the legal marriage, but also an emotional component, such as seeing the stepparent as a surrogate parent. Finally, other reasons were purely emotional, in which stepchildren described the stepparent being there for them, not trying to take over for their deceased or nonresidential parent, and treating them like their own child.

Second, Schmeeckle (2001) found the factors that contributed to the adult child considering the stepparent a family member included the number of years living together, the stepparent being legally married to the parent, and the adult child have strong feelings of family obligation. Finally, Baxter et al. (1999) took a different direction and asked stepfamily members to discuss turning points in their stepfamily development. Specifically, the participants were asked to rate how much they “felt like a family” with their stepfamily members at each turning point on a scale of zero (not at all) to 100 (like a family), which showed how strong their sense of shared family identity was with the stepfamily during each event. Through this method, the authors were able to show that family development is not a linear process, but one which has ups and downs. Therefore, we cannot assume that any relationship, including with family-of-origin extended families, will develop and then maintain in a linear progression.

As Baxter et al. (1999) found, our personal definitions of “family” are dynamic and will be managed and renegotiated throughout the family life cycle (Whitchurch & Dickson, 1999). For instance, when a divorce occurs, ex-spouses will have to redefine their relationship in order to successfully co-parent their children. If a parent moves out
of the home, the children and nonresidential parent will need to redefine the role of parent-child relationships. Braithwaite and Baxter (2006) found evidence of the process of redefining family roles in their study on stepchild and nonresidential parent relationships. They discovered that stepchildren in post-divorce stepfamilies said they wanted their nonresidential parent to be actively involved in parenting them rather than attempt to be their “friend” or “buddy”, yet when the nonresidential parent attempted to parent, the children did not want it. During transitions in particular, these redefinitions, or ambiguous boundaries, become more likely (Boss, 2002), as well as the necessity of communicative negotiation of where people fit, and what their role is in the family, making study of communication during family transitions critical (Whitchurch & Dickson, 1999).

It is important to understand the stepchildren’s perceptions of who constitutes family, as it will likely shape their interactions with their nonresidential parent’s family. In the present study I have focused on understanding how, if at all, stepchildren redefine their relationships with their nonresidential parent’s side of the family during a time of great transition in their lives – the transition into stepfamily life. As they become part of a “new” family, they may feel torn between their two households (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003), as well as miss out on some of their former family traditions or gatherings (DiVerniero, 2007a; 2007b), which might make them feel less connected to their old family. The more broad and inclusive their definition of “family” is, however, the more likely they will continue to view their nonresidential parent’s family as family members even after their family-of-origin dissolves and their residential parent remarries. Thus in the present study, I asked participants to discuss events which made them feel more or less like a
family, highlighting their levels of shared family identity with their nonresidential parent’s family, in order to understand their perceptions of familial boundaries during the transition into stepfamily life.

Another challenge the stepchild and extended family relationship may face is role ambiguity (Johnson, 1985). Family scholars have looked at role ambiguity in the stepfamily mostly from inside the immediate stepfamily household (Leake, 2007; Stewart, 2005). They argued that ambiguous boundaries, questions of what roles members should adopt, is a frequent concern for the immediate stepfamily members. For instance, stepparents may not know whether to treat their new stepchildren as friends or to take on a disciplinary role when the stepfamily forms (Brown & Manning, 2009). Both stepmothers and stepfathers reported that role ambiguity was their main stressor during their transition into stepfamily life (Leake, 2007). Stepchildren may also be uncertain as to whether they should take orders from their stepparent, and may feel guilty about developing a familial relationship with the stepparent, thinking it is traitorous to their nonresidential or deceased parent (Baxter et al., 2004). The same may hold true for the stepchild’s relationship with the nonresidential parent’s family. Despite the frequency of divorce and remarriage, there is a the lack of social prescriptions for how, if at all, to interact with one another and who they are to one another now that they are separated by divorce and remarriage. Therefore, it is unsurprising that children who experience parental divorce and remarriage are more likely to experience unclear boundaries within their family (Boss, 2002; Booth, 1999).

If definitions of family are renegotiated over the family life cycle, and familial roles can become ambiguous after a divorce and remarriage, then it is important to look at
the communication that occurs in stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family interactions. In the present study I asked stepchildren to describe these interactions over time to better understand how, if at all, stepchildren altered their communication when they feel more or less like a family. In the next section I argue that the intergroup perspective was a relevant lens to apply in the present study to understand these interactions.

The Intergroup Approach

A second goal of the present study was to understand how stepchildren perceive their familial boundaries, or shared family identity, with the nonresidential parent’s family. Using the intergroup approach highlighted the level of shared family identity stepchildren felt with their nonresidential parent’s family, as well as what factors contributed to a change in shared family identity. In the following section, I first explain the assumptions of the intergroup approach. Second, I argue the utility of using an intergroup lens to study family communication. Finally, I cite former studies on stepfamilies and intergroup communication to argue the appropriateness of the context of the present study in combination with the intergroup approach.

Explanation of the Intergroup Approach

The intergroup approach guides researchers in examining how individuals alter their communication based on group membership. It stems from work on Social Identity Theory (Tajifel, 1978). These researchers illustrated that there are two parts to self-concept, personal identity and social identity (Harwood, 2005). Personal identity consists of unique characteristics we see about ourselves which make us different from others. Social identity is created from how we categorize the world into social ingroups, those
like us, and outgroups, those different from us. Social identity includes both our knowledge of what it means to be a member of particular social groups, as well as the value and emotional significance attached to group membership (Gudykunst, 1986). Individuals gain a sense of identity from these memberships, which in turn become a salient part of self-concept. Tajfel (1978) argued that individuals learn early in life to make ingroup and outgroup distinctions and compare themselves to members of other groups. Researchers adopting the intergroup perspective acknowledge that how persons communicate with others is related to how they categorize our own and others’ social identities (Harwood & Giles, 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Hence, communication involves classifying others as members of a series of ingroups and outgroups, such as religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or family.

Intergroup communication is not communication that occurs between groups. Rather, intergroup communication occurs when transmission and meaning of messages is influenced by the group membership(s) of those involved (Harwood et al., 2005). Intergroup communication occurs when at least one of the individuals in an interaction perceives his or her own or others’ group membership to be salient; when social identity, rather than personal identity, becomes more important in the interaction (Harwood, Raman, & Hewstone, 2006). Group salience is the key variable in influencing the quality of intergroup contact and surrounds much of our communication (Harwood et al., 2006). Relational communication can be and is infused with group identities (Harwood, Soliz, & Lin, 2006), making communication integral in constructing and maintaining group membership (Harwood et al., 2005). Through the development of our social identity, we grow to recognize what groups we belong to, as well as if others fall into those same
categories. Perceptions of outgroups influence our behavior toward members of those outgroups, which in turn influences their behaviors toward us (Sedikides, Schopler, & Insko, 1998). As salience of the other’s membership grows, so does generalization toward the outgroup overall, as does a positive bias toward the ingroup. For example, if the nonresidential parent’s family found the stepchild’s new family identity salient, they may attempt to exclude the stepchild from their traditions, or talk down about the new stepfamily’s traditions to make their own seem more important.

In many cases, intergroup and interpersonal encounters do not occur simultaneously and the degree to which encounters are intergroup and interpersonal are generally negative correlated (Harwood et al., 2005). Encounters with high ingroup salience tend to be dissatisfying, cause more anxiety, are low in intimacy, and are higher in conflict (Harwood et al., 2006). The more salient group memberships, or intergroup distinctions, become, the less the interaction involves communication in which participants recognize the unique characteristics of the other. Yet, Brown and Hewstone (2005) state that there is no a priori reason to expect salience to have universally negative effects. If there is a chance for interpersonal communication, then there should be less anxiety. However, neither our relationships nor individual encounters are rigidly stuck as intergroup or interpersonal. They can and do overlap, and shift from one to the other. Stephenson (1981) stated, “When our nationality, sex, or occupation becomes salient in the interaction, this does not necessarily obliterate the interpersonal significance of the encounter; indeed, it may enhance it,” (p. 195). Gudykunst (1986) described communication as a continuum from total strangeness to total familiarity. When we communicate with strangers we base our predictions on group membership data
(Gudykunst, 1986). At the total familiarity end, we know the other and are therefore using little categorical data to make predictions. Little, if any, communication involves total familiarity, so ignoring categorical data totally is likely impossible. Soliz, Rittenour, and Thorson (2008) argued that while intergroup communication seems to translate easily to communication between strangers, there are a wider variety of contexts in which social identities influence the interactions. While much of the intergroup literature focuses on stereotypes and categorization of outgroups individuals have had little exposure to, the family is another potential and important source of intergroup communication, which I explored in the present study, and describe further in the next section.

**Families as Intergroup**

Although family may serve as the “most salient ingroup category in the lives of individuals,” (Lay et al., 1998, p. 434), these relationships can be subjected to intergroup categorizations when extraneous distinguishing factors become salient (Harwood et al., 2006). Family relationships and interactions might be intergroup due to factors such as intergenerational communication, gender, differing ethnicities, religions, or political beliefs (Harwood et al., 2006). The more diverse a family becomes, the higher the potential for these distinctions to occur. However, group membership salience often breeds generalizations, usually negative ones, toward the outgroup (Harwood et al., 2006). Harwood et al. (2006) stated, “high levels of group salience can be associated with less satisfying and more anxious interactions,” (p. 182). When a family’s intergroup distinctions are minimized, they are more likely to report feelings of a shared family identity (Soliz, 2007). Harwood et al. (2005) explained that an individual’s ability to
identify with their family is a key element in determining family harmony and positive communication.

Three intergroup situations in the family-of-origin have received recent research attention. First, sexuality can play a role in creating intergroup distinctions within the family (Soliz, Ribarisky, Harrigan, & Tye-Williams, 2007). Since sexuality is an important part of individuals’ social identity, the combination of homosexual and heterosexual individuals in the family can create intergroup situations. For example, if a homosexual family member discloses their sexuality to one or more heterosexual family members, it can redefine the relationship, and may cause intergroup anxiety. Second, multiethnic families may also experience intergroup communication. Soliz and colleagues (2008) found that relational satisfaction in these families was greatly influenced by how much individuals felt supported by family members, had an open relationship with family members, and believed their multiethnic identity is recognized and affirmed. Thus, it was important that the rest of the family did not avoid speaking about their culture. Supportive communication was a significant predictor of shared family identity. Third, age stereotypes within the family can also lead to intergroup distinctions (Harwood, 2005; Soliz & Harwood, 2006). Soliz and Harwood (2006) found that age salience in the grandparent and grandchild relationship is negatively related to shared family identity. However, if the grandchild identified with the family overall and received parental encouragement in their relationship with their grandparent, then they tended to illustrate higher levels of shared family identity with the grandparent. Soliz and Harwood (2006) were able to illustrate that even during intragroup communication, there is the potential for intergroup distinctions to occur and affect the relationship. Therefore,
even though stepchildren and the nonresidential parent’s family are still joined by blood and/or legality, they may still engage in intergroup communication if their differing group memberships due to the divorce and remarriage become salient.

**Stepfamilies as Intergroup**

Not surprisingly, stepfamilies are more likely to perceive intergroup distinctions within their immediate household than traditional nuclear families (Banker & Gaertner, 1998). In fact, Braithwaite et al. (2001) argued that, “In – and out-group membership may result from coalitions formed within the [stepfamily],” (p. 225). In a study on intergroup salience within the stepfamily, Banker and Gaertner (1998) found that stepchildren perceive their stepfamily members in one of four ways. First, some participants said they saw their stepfamily as one interconnected group, in which they felt all members, residential and stepparent/stepsiblings belonged to the same family without distinction. Second, others reported seeing their stepfamily as two subgroups within one group. These participants felt their family-of-origin and their stepparent/stepsiblings had two distinct identities, but that all of them were joined because of the remarriage. Third, some stepchildren saw their stepfamily as two distinct groups, and failed to identify at all with the stepparent/stepsiblings. Finally, some participants reported their stepfamily as unconnected, separate individuals, saying they did not identify with any of the family members. Interactions in which the intergroup distinctions become more salient, or lean toward the latter two categories, are negatively correlated with stepfamily harmony (Banker & Gaertner, 1998) and shared family identity (Soliz, 2007), two variables found to be of high importance for stepfamily success. Therefore, highly salient group distinctions within the stepfamily can act as a threat to the family’s success.
These group distinctions may occur in stepchild and nonresidential extended family interactions because, while they are still blood and/or legally related, the dissolution of the family-of-origin, as well as the transition into stepfamily life may create an added intergroup distinction for the stepchildren and extended family members. In fact, Messick and Mackie (1989) argued that the addition of new members into a group may instigate categorization, at least during the initial stages of integration. As argued earlier, however, interactions and relationships are not stuck only in an intergroup or interpersonal realm. For instance, stepchildren may have an interpersonal interaction with their nonresidential grandparent, in which neither individual is actively thinking about the age difference or the divorce and remarriage. If the stepchild gets a call from their residential parent during the interaction, that may make their individual group memberships more salient, and change the flow of the interaction. In the present study, I examined the context surrounding instances of intergroup and interpersonal communication between the stepchild and the nonresidential parent’s side of the family in order to better understand how and why stepchildren perceived intergroup distinctions in these interactions.

If intergroup communication generally results in less satisfying relationships (Harwood et al., 2006), then it is important to investigate the communication that develops and maintains group distinctions with nonresidential parent’s family and how stepchildren manage these interactions, as it can make them feel confused and uncertain (DiVerniero, 2007b). In fact, Banker & Gaertner (1998) argued that minimizing intergroup distinctions should be a main goal for stepfamilies in order to garner more harmonious interactions. Recent researchers on stepchild and stepgrandparent
relationships, however, painted a more positive picture of intergroup distinctions within the stepfamily (Soliz, 2007). Although stepchildren indicated higher levels of shared family identity with their family-of-origin grandparents, a perceived common ingroup ("we are family") mitigated both age and stepfamily outgroup distinctions in stepchild and stepgrandparent relationships. Therefore, in extended family and stepfamily interactions in which there are more than one outgroup distinction, developing a common ingroup should transcend negative perceptions of the outgroup. I argue that viewing this relationship from an intergroup perspective in the present study assisted in illustrating who stepchildren believe they share a family identity with, and how perceived group membership may contribute to how they communicate over time with the nonresidential parent’s family. Subsequent to the present project, I studied the ambiguity and uncertainties surrounding the first year of stepfamily life for stepchildren. In the next section I discuss how my pilot study and its findings are relevant to the dissertation.

The Pilot Study

In the pilot study (DiVerniero, 2007b), I examined what stepchildren felt uncertain about in their first year as part of a stepfamily, as well as how they communicatively managed their uncertainty. The research questions were formulated based upon the main tenets and suppositions for Brashers’ (2001) Uncertainty Management Theory, which posits how individuals respond to uncertainty will differ depending on the context.

I interviewed 22 current young adult stepchildren, 14 females and eight males, who had been in a stepfamily for one to eight years. The mean age of the participants was 21.9 years old and they ranged in age from 19-32 years old. One participant
identified as African American, one identified as Latino, and the rest were Caucasian. If the participant was a member of more than one stepfamily, they were asked to discuss the stepfamily they spent the most time with.

**Data Analysis**

The pilot study was designed under the interpretive paradigm, thus qualitative methods were used to analyze the data. The first step of the analysis was open coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), during which I found main, overarching themes of the data set. Uncertainty Management Theory served as the framework for identifying these themes, in that I first analyzed these data with an eye toward UMT’s applicable main tenets. Second, I assigned labels to each theme and then marked in the interview texts where those themes were found (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Third, I concluded the analysis by combining concepts and themes and presented a synthesized description of how stepchildren communicate to manage their uncertainty. Upon this conclusion, I participated in a collaborative data conference with five researchers trained in interpersonal communication theory and the interpretive paradigm. They worked together to review, challenge, and polish my analysis and categories, which tested the validity of my findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Findings from the Pilot Study**

In the first research question I asked what stepchildren are uncertain about when a new stepfamily forms. The participants discussed a wide variety of sources of uncertainty in the new stepfamily. There were two findings that are of particular importance to the dissertation. First, stepchildren reported that they were uncertain how, if they should at all, attempt to maintain relationships with their nonresidential parent’s family members.
Second, the stepchildren indicated they were also uncertain how, if at all, to talk about their nonresidential parent’s family in front of their new stepfamily members.

With the second research question I asked how stepchildren communicate to manage their uncertainty when a new stepfamily forms. They discussed three ways they managed their uncertainty. First, some participants discussed soliciting social support via talking to members of their social network, which occasionally included the nonresidential extended family, to manage uncertainty. Soliciting social support assisted them in managing their uncertainty regarding their new stepfamily life by allowing them to seek information, validate their perceptions, vent their feelings, shift their perceptions, and reminisce about the past. Second, avoiding certain topics and/or situations was another way stepchildren spoke about managing their uncertainty. Some participants said they chose to keep their own uncertainty levels high and avoided talking to or spending time with their new family in order to purposefully exclude them. Stepchildren also occasionally avoided talking or situations in order to include the stepparent. For instance, they would not discuss their nonresidential parent or family in order to make the stepparent feel more a part of the new stepfamily. Third, stepchildren managed their uncertainty through accommodating, agreeing to their family members requests to develop and maintain relationships without argument. More specifically, they faced the uncertain situations head on, “biting the bullet” and made an effort to continue relationships with nonresidential parent and extended family members as well as start ones with new family members.
Implications of the Pilot Study for the Dissertation

Three main implications for this dissertation study came out of the pilot study. First, although stepchildren spoke about a wide variety of uncertainties when a new stepfamily forms, the pilot study verified that stepchildren’s feelings of uncertainty were not restricted to the primary stepfamily household. There were factors outside their immediate circumstances that made them uncertain, including their nonresidential parent’s family. Some participants reported that some of their nonresidential parent’s family members reached out, saying “you are still a part of us” and continued to express interest in their lives, but even so, the stepchildren did not have as much time for the old family because they were expected to attend family events and holidays with the new extended family and stepfamily as well. Some stepchildren did not receive that explicit reminder that they were still part of their old family, which they said made them more unsure about how to maintain communication with people they’ve know their whole lives, but whose roles were now ambiguous after the dissolution of the marriage and the new remarriage of their residential parent.

Second, my pilot study illustrated that logical/empirical theories, if broad enough, can be used for interpretive work (Afifi & Matsunaga, 2007). In the present study I will use the similarly broad Communication Accommodation Theory to understand stepchildren’s communicative management of intergroup distinctions within the family. Although it is a logical/empirical theory, it can be applied to interpretive work as well, since it recognizes that accommodation changes depending on the context of the interaction, which I argue in more detail in the method section. In sum, an interpretive design was an appropriate paradigm to investigate the population of the present study.
Finally, stepchildren made clear intergroup distinctions in their responses during the pilot study regarding their nonresidential parent’s extended family. This appeared to be apparent for two reasons. First, when the stepchildren wanted or needed to speak about their nonresidential parent’s extended family, they attempted to do so when their new stepparent and/or stepsiblings were not around since they saw their stepfamily as belonging to a different group. Second, stepchildren also questioned how to maintain relationships with their nonresidential extended family because, although they knew many of these family members since birth, they felt disconnected and unsure whether their nonresidential parent’s family would still accept them as part of their group. The pilot study shows that the context of stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family relationships, the interpretive method, and an intergroup perspective are all appropriate for the present study. Therefore, in the next section, I argue Communication Accommodation Theory was the best theory to use for the dissertation. I contend that by asking stepchildren to recount turning points in their relationship with the nonresidential parent’s side of the family, I was better able to determine what, if any, accommodation, or changes in communication patterns, occurred in the relationship over time.

**Rationale for Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and Turning Points**

In this final section, I outline the theory and framework I used to guide my study, as well as how they helped me reach my final three overall goals. My third goal for the present study was to understand how, if at all, stepchildren accommodate, or alter, their communication with their nonresidential parent’s family during the transition into stepfamily life, as well as their motivations for doing so. In addition, because researchers have found that much of an individual’s behavior in an interaction occurs as a direct
response to the behavior of another (Gallois & Giles, 1998), my fourth goal was to understand how, if at all, stepchildren perceived their nonresidential parent’s family accommodating, as well as their perceived motivations behind the family’s actions. I argue that using Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) helped me reach these goals. My fifth and final goal for the dissertation was to understand the process of the stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family’s relationship, as well as the perceived intergroup salience, and accommodation strategies, over time. I complete this section by arguing that using turning points has allowed me to reach this final goal.

**History and Tenets of Communication Accommodation Theory**

A frequently used theory for understanding intergroup interactions in a variety of contexts has been Communication Accommodation Theory. First called Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT), the theory was introduced when Howard Giles began to examine various accents he heard in interview situations, and considered the implications of code switching in interaction (Shepard, Giles, & LePoire, 2001; Giles, 2008). The main thesis of SAT was that individuals use language to alter the social distance between themselves and others (Shepard et al., 2001). Furthermore, it posited that the individuals’ relationship and motivation were the driving factors behind choices in speech behaviors. The theory moved beyond the scope of *perceptions* of group salience to examine how and why individuals communicatively adapt to, or *accommodate*, others when group membership becomes salient (Harwood et al., 2006). It combines the study of communication and the intergroup perspective to allow researchers to examine how individuals alter their communication due to perceived group membership. In 1982, researchers pointed out the importance of considering the subjective nature of
accommodation, arguing that what the participants perceived to be occurring in an interaction was more important than the “reality” of what occurred (Shepard et al., 2001). Therefore, retroactive accounts of accommodation from participants in the present study will still give an insight to individuals’ relationships, perceptions, and motivations.

Accommodating behaviors may be manifested in one or more of CAT’s four sociolinguistic strategies (Coupland, Coupland, Giles, & Harwood, 1988; Giles, 2008). First, approximation strategies have been part of the theory since its inception. They describe how individuals adapt their communication through one or more of four ways. First, individuals may choose to converge, or try to speak or act more like others to lessen social distance. Second, divergence is actively trying to speak or act differently than the other in order to increase social distance. Third, maintenance is keeping communication the same, not moving toward or away from the other person at all. Fourth, complementing is when the parties engage in dissimilar behavior that reflects and reinforces their roles or status. They mutually attempt to maintain their social differences through communication.

A second sociolinguistic strategy is discourse management, which involves adapting communication based on conversational needs, such as avoiding a painful topic (Coupland et al., 1988). A third sociolinguistic strategy is interpretability in which the person accommodates to the other’s ability to understand (Harwood et al., 2006). For instance, if an adult is talking to a small child, they will likely simplify their speech so the child can understand. Fourth, interpersonal control is how individuals adapt communication based on power. An individual utilizing this type of strategy would attempt to direct the communication, or take control of the situation/relationship, through
such approaches such as interrupting or babytalking to others (Harwood et al., 2006). All of these strategies may involve going beyond the behaviors needed for the interaction (overaccommodation), or fail to sufficiently utilize behaviors for the interaction (underaccommodation) (Giles, 2008).

Studying accommodation in the context of family is important as well. In the family, “accommodative behaviors are more strongly associated with a shared family identity whereas nonaccommodative behaviors are representative of outgroup distinctions,” (Soliz, 2007, p. 5). For the present study, if the nonresidential parent’s family often brings up their dislike for the stepchild’s residential parent, then they are failing to accommodate to the needs of the stepchild, which may result in a lowered shared family identity. Therefore, CAT is an appropriate theory to use when examining the salience and communicative management of intergroup distinctions in stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family interactions. In particular, in the present study I examined both the stepchild’s descriptions of their own accommodation and their motivations for doing so, as well as their perceptions of their nonresidential parent’s family’s accommodation to better understand how each contributed to the other. In the final section of my argument for the present study, I contend that asking stepchildren to discuss turning points and the communication surrounding them in their relationship with the nonresidential parent’s family was an appropriate way to explore accommodation in the relationship.

Utility of Turning Points to Study Accommodation

It is rare for people to have absolute clarity about the roles of family members (Boss, 2002). Instead, the level of role ambiguity can fluctuate over time (Boss, 2002).
and families must manage and renegotiate their relational definitions throughout their family life cycle (Whitchurch & Dickson, 1999). Therefore, it is not only important to understand how stepchildren accommodate their communication, but how that accommodation might change over time as family definitions change. The combination of turning points, the intergroup approach, and Communication Accommodation Theory, allowed me to gather data on the interdependence of shared family identity and accommodation, as well as to better understand the communication surrounding changes in shared family identity and motivation for accommodation over time.

Bolton (1961) argued that turning points are a helpful tool to understand the development of relationships and in recent years, other scholars agree (Baxter, 2001; Graham, 2003; Johnson et al., 2004). Bolton (1961) argued that researchers should focus on the process of relationships, how they develop and change over time, which studying relationships from a turning point perspective allows scholars to do. It also allows researcher to acknowledge that communication is constitutive; communication constructs our personal relationships, making them dynamic and ever changing (Baxter, 2004). Graham (2003) described the meaning of and utility of turning points as:

The relational redefinition can involve turning points that mark how a relationship evolves. By definition, turning points capture a critical moment, an event or incident that has impact and import. Turning points trigger a reinterpretation of what the relationship means to the participants. These new meanings can influence the perceived importance of and justification for continued investment in the relationship…Individually identified, socially constructed, and evidenced in communication, turning
points provide insight into important relational dynamics by bringing certain characteristics of the relationship into focus. (p. 351)

A similar avenue for examining relationships over time are stage-based models, which are prescriptive explanations of the process relational partners can expect to go through. Stage-based models were too limited to employ in the present study for four reasons (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). First, linear representations of relationships presume a single sequence, ignoring the possibility of multiple developmental trajectories (Braithwaite et al., 2001). Using one model to illustrate how stepfamilies develop oversimplifies the wide array of types of stepfamilies and stepfamily situations. Second, they assume linear progress in relationships, thus asserting that relationships would develop without fluctuation (Braithwaite et al., 2001). As already argued, relationships are constantly renegotiated throughout the life cycle (Whitchurch & Dickson, 1999), thus a stage-based model which depicts a linear developmental process may not speak to the reality of individuals’ lives. Third, these models observe that relationships move through a series of plateaus, with long periods of stability and disregard times of change (Baxter et al., 1999). Fourth, the boundaries between the stages in the models are unclear, making it difficult to determine where one ends and begins (Baxter et al., 1999). Therefore, for the dissertation, I gathered a more detailed description of the participants’ perceptions and communication by asking them to plot and describe turning points of their relationship with their nonresidential parent’s family.

Family researchers using RIT interviews have discovered a variety of turning points in both post-dissolutional family relationships, such as post-divorce spouses (Graham, 1997), and new developing stepfamily relationships (Baxter et al., 1999).
Graham (1997) found that even in situations where couple divorce, they will not necessarily end all communication. In fact, she discovered a wide array of turning points for the post-divorcees, illustrating that some semblance of a relationship remained, despite the dissolution of the marriage.

In stepfamilies, Baxter et al. (1999) examined how much or little stepfamily members “felt like a family” during each turning point (Baxter et al., 1999). Turning points which tended to make stepfamily members feel like less of a family were conflict or disagreement, unmet expectations or disappointment, breakup or divorce of the remarried couple, and negative intrapsychic changes, which were psychological changes not clearly provoked by external events. Stepfamily members also reported turning points during which some felt more like a family and some felt less like a family. They were changes in the household or family composition, and life changes for the ex-spouse or nonresidential parent. Additionally, participants discussed several turning points which made them more like a family. They included reconciliation events, holidays and special events, quality time with one another, relocation, changes in employment, prosocial actions, such as acts of kindness among family members, and positive intrapsychic changes. A final positive turning point, and most important to the present study, were social network events, which involved friends and relatives, such as the extended kin. As already discussed, acceptance or rejection from the nonresidential parent’s family was an important turning point for the immediate stepfamily’s development (Baxter et al., 1999). Therefore, stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family communication will play a role not only in their relationship, but beyond it to the immediate stepfamily’s functioning, making it a valid and necessary context for study. Braithwaite et al. (2001) also found
that stepfamilies will not all follow the same trajectory in their developmental process, making turning points suitable to learn more about stepchildren and the nonresidential parent’s family’s interactions.

Based on the findings of the pilot study, which highlighted intergroup distinctions in the stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family relationship, and previous researchers’ findings regarding the dynamism of familial boundaries, I argue that CAT and turning points are suitable to guide the dissertation study and advance the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the turning points in stepchildren’s relationship with their nonresidential parent’s family during the first 48 months of the stepfamily’s development?

RQ2: How do stepchildren perceive and describe family identification with their nonresidential parent’s family during each turning point?

RQ3: How, if at all, do stepchildren accommodate their communication in interactions with their nonresidential parent’s family members over time?

RQ4: What are stepchildren’s motivations for accommodating, or not, in interactions with their nonresidential parent’s family members?

RQ5: How, if at all, do stepchildren, in interactions with their nonresidential parent’s family, perceive their family members are accommodating over time?
RQ6: How do stepchildren, in interactions with their nonresidential parent’s family, perceive their family’s motivations for accommodating, or not, over time?

The findings of this study will be useful for new stepfamilies, the nonresidential parent’s family members, and practitioners, because the results will help these groups understand that challenges in stepfamily life are not sequestered to the immediate stepfamily household, and that perceptions of who “belongs” in a family can impact communication and relationships.
CHAPTER TWO:
ARGUMENT FOR METHOD AND PROCEDURES

Data Collection Procedures

My purpose in the present study was to discover how, if at all, stepchildren perceived intergroup distinctions in their interactions with their nonresidential parent’s family, as well as how they communicate and manage any intergroup salience over time. I grounded my study in the interpretive paradigm using qualitative methods; specifically I collected data via in-depth interviews. I chose to use interviews as my data collection method in order to elicit rich description and better understand the participants’ experiences. The interpretive paradigm was especially useful for me to do this as using it allowed my participants to describe in detail how they perceived and managed their relationships with the nonresidential parent’s family (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In this chapter, I explain the interpretive paradigm and justify how working within this paradigm allowed me to achieve the goals of my study. I argue how using the qualitative method of in-depth semi-structured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) allowed me to gather descriptive details that were consistent with the purpose of the interpretive tradition.

Paradigmatic Rationale

The design of this study was in the qualitative/interpretive tradition (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Rosenblatt & Fischer, 1993). Interpretive researchers strive to identify recurring patterns of communication behaviors and meanings (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). Baxter and Babbie (2004) wrote that in contrast to post-positivism, interpretive researchers believe that:
Humans act not because some external variable caused them to behave a certain way…Humans act the way they do because they are attempting to do something purposive, and such action is made intelligible or meaningful in this light. Human action is meaning-making activity. Given this orientation to human action, the primary goal of the interpretive researcher is to understand the web of meanings in which humans act. (p. 59)

I used CAT as a sensitizing theory to gain a more comprehensive view of stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family interactions. The tenets of CAT, as described earlier, were originally developed to generalize and make predictions about accommodation in a given situation. (Harwood et al., 2006). This theory has most often been used by researchers who operate within quantitative/post-positivist traditions (e.g., Giles, 2008; Gnisci & Bakeman, 2007; McCann & Giles, 2006; Soliz, 2007). One exception is a study by Jones, Gallois, Callan, and Barker (1999) in which they used qualitative methods to determine how students and instructors accommodate in conversation with each other. The student and instructor participants were given a topic to discuss and their conversation was taped. This qualitative data, however, was used to test a coding system for CAT, making the study fall under the category of post-positivist even though the researchers used qualitative methods (Jones et al., 1999). Despite this, I used CAT in combination with the interpretive design of the present study to answer my research questions. Although CAT is a logical/empirical theory, researchers using it also acknowledge that accommodation strategies are “highly contingent upon the situational context in which the interaction occurs,” (Shepard et al., 2001, p. 37). Therefore, while
researchers using CAT may strive to generalize their findings, the extent to which this is possible must be interpreted based on the context of a given interaction. In an interpretive study, CAT was flexible enough to be used as a sensitizing theory rather than one that strives to make predictions. CAT informed my research questions, interview guide, and data analysis, but it was not “tested” or used to develop cross-contextual predictions.

**Procedures**

After receiving IRB approval, I interviewed 29 current and former stepchildren; 15 females and 14 males. Their mean age was 25.34 years and their ages ranged from 19-59 years old. One participant identified as Black, one identified as Latino, and the remaining 27 identified as Caucasian. I recruited these participants with an email announcement to my social network and through the snowballing method, which involved asking participants if they could refer me to anyone else who would fit my participation criteria (Creswell, 2007; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The participants needed to meet three criteria. First, they had to be adults (over the age of 19) per the IRB requirements of my institution. Second, they needed to have been a member of a stepfamily for at least four years. I chose to ask them about the first four years of their stepfamily’s development because in earlier studies, stepchildren reported feeling most uncertain about family membership during the early stages of stepfamily development (Bray & Kelly, 1998; DiVerniero, 2007) and researchers have listed four years as the make or break point for stepfamilies (Papernow, 1993). However, this requirement does not mean the stepchild’s family-of-origin parent and stepparent needed to be married for at least four years. Rather, as Ganong and Coleman (1994) argued, basing the start of stepfamily development on the remarriage would have been too restrictive, since there
are a wide variety of stepfamilies and paths to stepfamily life. Some stepfamilies never have a legal marriage of the adults, others might interact often before the remarriage, and still others cohabitate first. Thus, there are a variety of ways in which stepfamily relationships might begin to develop before a remarriage occurs, if one occurs at all. It was up to the participants to determine when their stepfamily development began, and their family must have been in existence for a minimum of four years from that date. A third participation requirement was that the stepchildren must have had a relationship with their nonresidential parent’s family that they can remember occurring before the stepfamily formed. This was useful in determining whether any accommodation took place after the stepfamily formed. The interviews focused on the participants’ communication with their nonresidential parent’s family members during the first four years of the transition into stepfamily life.

The interviews took approximately 30-60 minutes and took place in a private office. I audiotaped each interview and transcribed them myself. In accordance with the interpretive paradigm, the number of interviews I planned to complete was not set in advance. Rather, I continued collecting data until I reached theoretical saturation and had a data set that would be credible to readers. Theoretical saturation is achieved when researchers continue to observe recurring patterns and themes, and as a result, new categories are no longer generated (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I first began noticing similar patterns among the interviews about 10 participants into the study. I continued collecting data to further verify that the recurring patterns were similar enough to be considered theoretical saturation and that I had a large enough data set to be deemed credible for a dissertation.
Turning Point Interviews

I employed a modification of the retrospective interview technique (RIT) to evoke descriptions of the stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family’s relationship over time (Huston, Surra, Fitzgerald, & Cate, 1981). The RIT is a commonly used method in the study of turning points (e.g., Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Baxter et al., 1999). Researchers using this method ask participants to identify and plot on a graph all of the turning points in a given time period in the development or maintenance of their relationship. As participants in the present study recalled each turning point, they plotted it on a graph. The x-axis was time in monthly intervals over the first 48 months of their stepfamily’s development. The y-axis was the level of “feeling like family” (i.e., shared family identity) they experienced during each turning point, which is consistent with what Baxter et al. (1999) used in their study of stepfamily turning points. “Feeling like family” (FLF) was assessed on a scale of 0 (not at all) to 100 (felt very close) (Baxter et al., 1999). This rating, along with the participants’ description of the communication surrounding the turning point, illustrated how salient the participant felt familial group membership was during each turning point, as I expand on in the results chapters. It was important to understand the communication surrounding the FLF changes in order to better understand what contributed to the level of intergroup salience in the stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family’s interactions since high intergroup salience and low shared family identity can be harmful to the relationship (Banker & Gaertner, 1998).

I chose to use semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) for two reasons. First, interviews allow the researcher to get at the nuances of lived life by evoking rich description from the participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). With a well-
developed protocol and an ear for answers that need to be followed up on, an interviewer can discover layers of meaning in their interviewee’s answers. Second, the participant’s comfort level is important to consider (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In an interview, the participants need to only feel secure with one other person, the interviewer. If the topic is something personal, participants may not want to talk about their experiences in front of a group of people.

Participants in the present study answered a series of open-ended questions about each of the turning points they identified, designed to elicit a description of their communication with their nonresidential parent’s family in a semi-structured, in-depth interview (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). For the semi-structured interview, I had an interview guide prepared, which listed major and sub-questions I planned to ask the participants, which is described more fully in the following section (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). I also listened carefully to follow up on ideas the participants might bring up which may not have been considered as I designed the interview guide (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). While I had a plan of action in the interviews, that plan was malleable, depending on how each participant responded to my initial questions.

The interviews consisted of eight steps. First, I asked the participants to tell me the story of their parents’ divorce. Second, I asked them to tell me the story of how their stepfamily formed. Third, I described the FLF graph to them and asked participants how they would rate their relationship with their nonresidential parent’s family before their residential parent remarried as well as currently. If their parents shared custody, then I asked them to discuss the family of the parent they spent the least amount of time with.
Fourth, I asked what a perfect score (100) on the graph meant to them. Fifth, I asked them to tell me what month and year their stepfamily’s development began, and mark that on the graph, as well as label the 47 months afterwards. Sixth, I asked them to plot the first turning point with their nonresidential parent’s family on the graph. Seventh, I asked them to elaborate on what that particular point entailed. They discussed who was present during the event, what the occasion was, what was talked about, and why it made them feel more or less like a family with their nonresidential parent’s family. In order to learn about any accommodation occurring during the turning points, I also asked them to discuss their reaction to the nonresidential parent’s family during the event and their motivations for behaving a certain way, as well as how they perceived the motivations behind their nonresidential parent’s family’s behaviors. I repeated steps six and seven until the participant had exhausted all the turning points they could recall. Finally, I asked them to connect all of the turning points on the graph and discuss their relationship with the nonresidential parent’s family in general since the stepfamily formed.

**Data Analysis**

The interviews produced 238 pages and 12,890 double-spaced lines of transcribed data. I used Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis method in order to analyze the data and discover categories of turning points, as well as themes of intergroup distinctions, accommodation, and motivation in the stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family relationship. This method involved six major steps. First, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest familiarizing yourself with the data. This includes transcribing interviews if necessary, reading and re-reading transcripts, and jotting down initial ideas. Second, researchers should generate initial codes during which they identify “interesting features
of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set,” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87) and collect data relevant to each code. The third step is searching for themes and matching each potential theme with relevant data. In order to recognize these themes, I used Owen’s (1984) method of thematic interpretation, which includes three ways to identify a theme: recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Recurrence involves seeing the same meaning on at least two occasions in the data, though different words can signify the same meaning. Repetition, an extension of recurrence, is the repeating of key words or sentences. Forcefulness requires the research to attend to the paralanguage of the participants as well as any words highlighted in the data. These changes in the participants’ paralanguage, such as inflection or volume, can illustrate an attempt to stress or hide some of their discourse.

After identifying themes, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) fourth step is reviewing the themes to make sure they work in sync with the coded extracts as well as the entire data set in order to generate an overall thematic map of the data. Fifth, I defined and named the themes. This involved an ongoing analysis to refine and edit the intricacies of each theme and the overall “story” the analysis tells. In the present study, I did this to answer each of my six research questions. For the first research question, which asks what the turning points are in stepchildren’s relationship with their nonresidential parent’s family, I looked for themes of the types of turning points the participants reported. For example, in the Baxter et al. (1999) study, they found that changes in household composition was a turning point for some stepfamily members. The second research question asked how stepchildren perceived the salience of intergroup distinctions in their communication with the nonresidential parent’s family members over time. To answer this question, I looked
at which categories of turning points were described as making the stepchildren feel more like a family with the nonresidential parent’s side, which made them feel like less of a family, and which turning points did both. I also coded trajectories to illustrate the themes of turning points according to visual similarity (Graham, 1997; Kellas et al., 2008). This involved connecting the turning points plotted by participants on their graphs to create trajectories, and then comparing them among one another to find themes in the data.

The third and fifth research questions asked what ways, if any, do stepchildren accommodate their communication, and perceive their nonresidential parent’s family accommodate in interactions over time. For these themes, I focused on the data regarding the communication occurring during each turning point, and how that communication may have changed over the first 48 months of the stepfamily’s development. I used Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) as a sensitizing theory to analyze data for this research question. The theory was used in order to help me make sense of whether the stepchildren used any sociolinguistic strategies, and/or perceived their nonresidential parent’s family using any strategies, to accommodate their communication in these interactions. These include: (a) approximation, (b) interpretability, (c) discourse management, and (d) interpersonal control. The fourth and sixth research questions asked what the stepchild’s motivations are for accommodating, and what motivations they perceived behind their nonresidential parent’s family’s accommodation. I looked to the stepchildren’s accounts of their own and their nonresidential family’s behavior, to determine the perceived goals for social distance in these encounters. Specifically, I analyzed the participants’ discourse to discover whether the motivations were to: (a) converge, (b) diverge, (c) maintain, or (d) complement.
The sixth and final step of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis method is producing the report, which required me to select vivid examples for each theme, relate the analysis back to the initial research questions and previous literature, and write up the results in a scholarly report. Upon completion of analyzing the data, I then worked to validate my findings, which I describe in the next section.

Validation

In order to validate my findings, I undertook two steps. First, I participated in an interactive data conference, as is a practice in my research community. I held an extended meeting with three other researchers trained in the interpretive paradigm and CAT. The other researchers reviewed, challenged, and helped me polish my analysis and categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Second, I conducted 10 member check interviews, representing approximately one-third of the total participant pool, in order to examine the validity and accuracy of the data reported in the findings (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This member checking involved describing my findings to a sample of the actual participants from my study and allowing them to indicate whether those findings match their realities, thus serving as the interpretive researcher’s reliability and validity check (Doyle, 2007; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).
CHAPTER THREE:

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Turning Points in Stepchild and Nonresidential Parent’s Family Communication

Summary and Overview of Results Chapters

My overall goal in the present study was to explore how stepchildren perceived family identification, or group membership, between themselves and the nonresidential parent’s family, specifically focusing on how they communicated and managed these interactions over time, and how they perceived their nonresidential parent’s family communicated and managed the interactions as well. Adopting an intergroup perspective and Communication Accommodation Theory to drive the study, I posed six research questions to better understand this relationship over time:

RQ1: What are the turning points in stepchildren’s communication with their nonresidential parent’s family?

RQ2: How do stepchildren perceive and describe family identification with their nonresidential parent’s family during each turning point?

RQ3: How, if at all, do stepchildren accommodate their communication in interactions with their nonresidential parent’s family members over time?

RQ4: What are stepchildren’s motivations for accommodating, or not, in interactions with their nonresidential parent’s family members over time?

RQ5: How, if at all, do stepchildren, in interactions with their nonresidential parent’s family, perceive their family members are accommodating over time?

RQ6: How do stepchildren, in interactions with their nonresidential parent’s family’s, perceive their family’s motivations for accommodating, or not, over time?
In this chapter I first provide a broad overview of the two results chapters. Second, I present the detailed results in answer to my first and second research questions. Each of the results chapters are followed by a summary and a discussion of the main findings in the chapter.

**Overview of Results Chapters**

I have devoted Chapter Three to discussing my findings for research questions one and two, in which I asked what turning points stepchildren reported in communication with their nonresidential parent’s family, as well as how they perceived family identification during each turning point. Based on my analysis of these data, in answer to research questions one and two, I discovered that stepchildren felt more or less like family (FLF) in response to a variety of turning points. More specifically, I developed five categories of turning points that stepchildren said made them feel *more* like family with the nonresidential parent’s family and five categories of turning points that made them feel *less* like family with the nonresidential parent’s family. I then categorized the participants’ discourses into one of five trajectories to visually illustrate the stepchildren’s and nonresidential parent’s family relational development during the first 48 months the new stepfamily has formed. The main focus of Chapter Three is to give a description of the turning points and trajectories, in order to highlight the results of research questions one and two.

In Chapter Four, I expand on my analysis in response to the last four research questions. These asked about stepchildren’s accommodation and motivations in communication with their nonresidential parent’s family, as well as their perceptions of the nonresidential parent’s family’s accommodation and motivations. My analysis of
stepchildren’s communication showed how the participants accommodated in their interactions with the nonresidential parent’s family and the motivations behind this accommodation. My analysis of stepchildren’s perceptions of their nonresidential parent’s family’s communication highlighted how the participants perceived their nonresidential parent’s family’s accommodated in interactions and the participants’ perceptions of the family’s motivations behind these strategies as well. Further discussion of the accommodation strategies and motivations can be found in Chapter Four.

In the fifth and final chapter, I present conclusions of the broad contributions of my findings. I discuss the strengths and limitations of the present project, and end with directions for future researchers exploring intergroup communication in interpersonal relationships. To follow, I report what I found in answer to the first and second research questions.

Turning Points and Family Identification Experienced by Stepchildren with Their Nonresidential Parent’s Family

To answer the first and second research questions, I asked about the turning points in stepchildren’s communication with their nonresidential parent’s family, as well as how stepchildren perceived family identification, or feeling like family, during each turning point. I discovered a variety of turning points that stepchildren expressed made them feel more or less like family over time. This supports former researchers’ assertions that it is natural for families to feel some ambiguity about how close they are to each other during the entire length of the relationship (Boss, 2002), and that family members will renegotiate relational definitions multiple times throughout the family life cycle (Whitchurch & Dickson, 1999). Boundary and role ambiguity may become more prevalent during times of transition, such as the transition into stepfamily life (Boss,
Whether all positive, all negative, or a mixture of the two, the stepchildren’s discourse about their communication with the nonresidential parent’s family during turning points illustrated that they occasionally changed the way they thought about their place in their nonresidential parent’s side of the family during the first 48 months of their stepfamily’s development. Although their experiences varied, I identified and grouped the results into five categories of turning points that stepchildren discussed that made them feel more family identification, or more like family, with the nonresidential parent’s family, and five categories of turning points that they explained made them feel less like family. I also combined the turning point graphs from the 29 interviews into five trajectories of stepchildren’s perceived relational development with the nonresidential parent’s family over the first 48 months of the new stepfamily’s formation. I have added a table below to highlight the turning points which made stepchildren feel more or less like family with their nonresidential parent’s family, as well as illustrate how each turning point category functioned to strengthen or weaken the stepchildren’s family identification with the nonresidential parent’s side. The first three turning point categories functioned to make some stepchildren feel more like family and some stepchildren feel less like family.
Table 1

An overview of turning points experienced by stepchildren in interactions with their nonresidential parent’s family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turning Point Category</th>
<th>How turning point functioned to make stepchildren feel more like family</th>
<th>How turning point functioned to make stepchildren feel less like family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developing relationships with the stepfamily</td>
<td>Allowed stepchildren to reminisce about times with their nonresidential parent’s family and how much more they had in common with the nonresidential parent’s side.</td>
<td>1. Spending time with the new stepfamily lowered the stepchild’s quantity of communication with the nonresidential parent’s family. 2. Stepchild’s relationships with the stepfamily grew stronger than their relationship with the nonresidential parent’s family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending time with the nonresidential parent’s family</td>
<td>Receiving the same treatment from the nonresidential parent’s family as before the stepchild’s parents’ divorce and remarriage made them feel closer and more included in the group</td>
<td>Lack of quality communication with the nonresidential parent’s family; feeling as though they were treated differently after their parent’s remarriage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relocating</td>
<td>1. This brought some stepchildren physically closer to the nonresidential parent’s family, allowing them to increase the quantity of their communication. 2. This garnered positive reactions from the nonresidential parent’s family, making the stepchild feel more included.</td>
<td>Quantity of communication lowered if the stepchild or a nonresidential parent’s family member moved away, or the nonresidential parent moves away, causing a new barrier in the stepchild – nonresidential parent’s family’s relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving encouragement from the residential parent</td>
<td>This relieved the stress of managing interactions and celebrations with multiple sides of the family for the stepchild, as well as quelled their guilt for missing time with the residential parent and their side of the family.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing family crisis</td>
<td>1. The nonresidential parent’s family reached out to the stepchild, making them feel supported during difficult times.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. The negative experience allowed the stepchild to reminisce about happier times with the nonresidential parent’s family, making them feel closer to the group.

Participating in rituals

1. Stepchild’s participation in their either parents’ remarriage signifies end of “old” family.
2. Not being invited to nonresidential parent’s family events makes them feel less included.

Conflicting or disagreeing

Nonresidential parent’s family ganging up on the stepchild’s residential family made them feel as though they must choose sides.

I elaborate on the turning points and the participants’ descriptions of why they felt more or less like family in the remainder of the chapter. In the following section, I expand upon the turning points that stepchildren reported made them feel more like family with the nonresidential parent’s family.

Turning Points that Stepchildren Reported Made Them Feel More Like Family with the Nonresidential Parent’s Family

My analysis of the participants’ description of their interactions with the nonresidential parent’s family found that there were five types of turning points that made them feel more like family with their nonresidential parent’s family: (a) developing relationships with the stepfamily, (b) spending time with the nonresidential parent’s family, (c) relocating, (d) receiving encouragement from the residential parent, and (e) managing family crisis. What follows is a description of each of these themes supported by representative quotations from the interviews.
Developing relationships with the new stepfamily. First, during the first 48 months of their new stepfamily’s development, some stepchildren reported that their developing relationships with the stepfamily and the new extended stepfamily actually worked to make them feel more like family with the nonresidential parent’s side of the family. As stepchildren learned more about this new group of people in their stepfamily, they would compare them to their nonresidential parent’s family, resulting in stronger feelings of family identification with the nonresidential parent’s family, even though they were not interacting with them during this particular turning point. In essence, this perception of the stepfamily as outgroup and the nonresidential parent’s family as ingroup was created and maintained through reminiscing. While reminiscing is a concept more often examined within elderly populations (Bryant et al., 2005), in the pilot study for the present dissertation I found that reminiscing was one communication strategy stepchildren used to manage their uncertainty about the new stepfamily (DiVerniero, 2007). Even if interacting with the stepfamily and extended stepfamily was not upsetting or negative, participants in the pilot study were still able to get a sense of comfort by thinking of their past interactions with their nuclear or nonresidential parent’s extended family because they were brought back to a place mentally that was more secure and certain.

My analysis of the stepchildren’s discourse in the present study reflected a similar feeling of reminiscing about better times. I observed that during turning points in which stepchildren time spent interacting with the new stepfamily and extended stepfamily, some of them reminisced about how much closer they were to their nonresidential parent’s family. One participant, Aaron, described that he often secretly
reminisced about times with his nonresidential parent’s family while interacting with his new stepfamily, even though he wanted to become close to them as well. He explained:

I found myself really like making an effort to establish relationships with my new stepfamily, but the whole time I was constantly thinking about how much cooler my dad’s family is. And I would be conscious of this, conscious of me thinking about how white trash my stepdad’s family is and how gross they are cause his parents smoked and I think again it goes back to this trying to be loyal to my father and his family. Like nothing, there’s no way that [my stepfather’s] mom and dad are better than my dad’s mom and dad. (P16: 273-279; this notation denotes participant number followed by line numbers from the interview transcripts)

Another participant, Mary, explained that she and her sister reminisced with their nonresidential parent’s family about times together, directly comparing themselves and their values to Mary’s new stepfather, particularly his attempts to cut down on the communication Mary had with her nonresidential parent’s family. She said that through the process of developing a negative relationship with her stepfather, she was able to reminisce about how much more pleasant her time with the nonresidential parent’s side of the family was:

I think that that was kind of a bonding thing. Initially [the remarriage] kind of pulled us apart a little bit cause we had this new grandma and this new all this other stuff, but then like as we became more disconnected to [my stepfather], we became more connected with my dad’s family. (P24: 250-253)
Reminiscing, whether it was done with or without others, appeared to allow the stepchild to perceive clearer intergroup distinctions between their different sides of the family. In these instances, they compared their own values and behaviors to the new stepfamily and found that they fit in with their nonresidential parent’s family more, allowing them to feel more like family without even necessarily interacting with the nonresidential parent’s family.

Spending time with the nonresidential parent’s family. The second turning point that made them feel more like family with their nonresidential parent’s family, was spending time with the nonresidential parent’s family. However, simply spending time together was not enough to make participants in the present study denote this as a turning point. Rather, the stepchildren expressed that it was interactions with the nonresidential parent’s family in which the family treated them the same as they did before the divorce and remarriage occurred that made them feel more part of the nonresidential group. Participants discussed that they were especially sensitive to being treated differently than other children in the nonresidential parent’s family who were not in a stepfamily and spent more time with the stepchild’s nonresidential parent’s side. Despite the fact that many of the stepchildren had new stepfamily obligations that kept them from interacting with the nonresidential parent’s family as often as the other children in the family, for example their cousins, when the nonresidential side treated all family members equally, participants flagged these interactions as turning points. Most participants whose discourse I categorized as this type of turning point described that it was the first time they had spent time with the nonresidential parent’s side since their residential parent’s
remarriage and were nervous that things would be different, or it was the first time they noticed the nonresidential parent’s family’s effort in treating them the same as before.

For instance, Alaina went to visit her nonresidential parent’s family with her father and some cousins, and was happy to find that despite their lack of frequent contact, her grandparents communicated with her the same as the rest of the grandchildren. She explained, “I think [they] just treated me like a granddaughter, or a daughter, just like everyone else … There was never any segregation between, like oh you’re new and you’re not, and you’re never around…” (P7: 310, 315-317). Another participant, Patrick, told a similar story, saying that visiting his grandparents was a turning point because he perceived that they went out of their way to make sure the yearly visits stayed the same as they had before his parents’ divorce and his mother’s remarriage:

I think another reason why [the relationship] worked well is cause it was a grandparent-grandchild relationship and we were younger kids, so I don’t think my grandparents were overly concerned with talking to us about what was happening with mom and dad. It was almost like, “When you’re here, you’re here with us and we’re going to spend time with you and invest in you as much as we can while we have you, rather than trying to rehash all the other stuff you’re going through back home.” (P14: 481-490)

Some stepchildren also identified that being able to share special occasions with the nonresidential parent’s family qualified as turning points. These rituals ranged from weddings, to holiday traditions, to sporting events, and tied in with the stepchildren’s desire to continue being treated the same, as discussed above. Not only did they want to
be invited to events or have their nonresidential family attend their events, but they also
did not want to be an outsider once they were all there together. For example, Kaitlin
stated that her cousin’s wedding was a turning point for her because she was involved in
planning for the wedding, along the rest of her nonresidential family members:

It’s a special celebration that everybody takes part in, even the far away
family comes up, you know the people that are living in Florida come up
and we’re all pitching in to make this a success and working together and
it becomes, yeah it’s their wedding and their special day, but it’s also a
family event, a reason to celebrate family. (P12: 349-352)

Another participant, Nadia, said that when her nonresidential parent’s family would show
up to her basketball games, even if they had to drive a little out of their way, it would
make her feel more like family with them.

…they didn’t come to all the games, but when I would travel anywhere near
where my grandparents lived, if it was within an hour they would make sure
they would come out. Or like we would play [near them] a lot so on road trips
they would always come out and support me and to me that meant a lot just
cause of everything that had happened, and they would still come out and
watch us. And like state basketball, which is here, my whole family would
come, cousins, aunts and uncles, all over, so that was nice. (P19: 303-310)

Thus, in interactions with the nonresidential parent’s family in which the family
illustrated, verbally and/or nonverbally, that they still cared for and thought the same of
the stepchild, the participants perceived themselves as more like family with the
nonresidential parent’s side. Consistency in the face of change was also a theme
highlighted in stepchildren’s discourse about the next turning point, relocating.

**Relocating.** Relocating was a third turning point that made some of the participants
feel more like family. I discovered that relocating made participants feel more like family
with the nonresidential parent’s family for two reasons. First, some participants indicated
that relocating with their new stepfamily allowed them to move physically closer to their
nonresidential parent’s family. This in turn allowed the quantity of communication to
increase between the stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family, which these
stepchildren expressed made them feel more like part of the family. When Kaitlin’s
mother remarried, they moved to the city her new stepfather lived in, which also
happened to be the same city her nonresidential parent’s family lived in. Although she
was now about two hours away from her biological father, relocating allowed her to feel
more like family with the rest of her father’s family. She stated:

> The moving brought on by the divorce brought me closer physically to the
> [nonresidential] family which facilitated emotional closeness… It was a
> lot easier to have them come to choir concerts and basketball games and
> things like that because I went to school in the same area. (P12: 247-249,
> 254-255)

A second reason stepchildren said relocating made them feel more like family
with the nonresidential parent’s family is because moving garnered positive reactions
from the nonresidential side, making the stepchild feel more accepted. Darren stated that
his decision to stay with his mother for a couple of years before permanently moving in
with his father pleased his mother’s family. He explained, “It was fine when I was living
with my mom, and they thought that was just great.” (P9: 435-436). The positive reactions from his mother’s family led Darren to feel more included. For some stepchildren, however, it was not necessary for the relocation to move them closer to the nonresidential parent’s family for it to result in affirmation from the family. Jane’s new stepfamily moved about an hour away from her nonresidential parent’s family, yet Jane still said she considered the relocation a turning point that made her identify with the nonresidential parent’s side because of their positive response to the move. She explained, “I felt more like family cause they were happy that I moved and I was in a more stable environment,” (P17: 337-338). Thus, the nonresidential family’s acceptance of her new stepfamily and their new life together allowed Jane to feel closer to them even though she was physically farther away. While closer proximity to the nonresidential parent’s side was the impetus for a closer relationship for some of the participants, it was not necessary in all cases to make the stepchild perceive being emotionally closer to the nonresidential parent’s family.

**Receiving encouragement from residential parent.** The fourth turning point that made stepchildren feel more like family with the nonresidential parent’s family was encouragement from the residential parent. For many of the participants, this encouragement came in the form of their residential parent not preventing them from going to their nonresidential parent’s family’s events and/or avoiding the topic of the nonresidential parent’s family in order to keep from bad mouthing them. However, for a couple of stepchildren, specific conversations with their residential parents were perceived as turning points because of the explicit encouragement they received, which they described allowed them to feel less guilty about their connection to the
nonresidential parent’s side. For instance, Ben explained that for the first few years after his parents’ divorce and his mother’s remarriage, he and his brother exhausted themselves trying to visit all sides of the family for each holiday, so they would not hurt anyone’s feelings by missing a celebration. However, a turning point for him occurred when his mother addressed the issue and encouraged him to spend more time with his father’s side of the family. He explained:

…she’s like “I know you guys have two commitments you have to be at, and you know don’t bother if you can’t make it to one. If you have to keep your dad happy,” is what she said, “keep him happy, go with him. It isn’t going to bother us if you’re not there cause we’ll see you.” (P5: 294-297)

Ben expressed that this conversation quelled his guilt about spending time away from his residential parent and stepparent, allowing him to feel closer to his nonresidential parent’s side of the family. Lila spoke of a similar guilty feeling about attending her nonresidential parent’s side’s events, especially since her nonresidential parent, her father, was in and out of her life, whereas her mother was always there for her. She described that being with her father and his family after all the negative things her father put the entire family through made her feel like she was "stabbing [mom and my stepdad] in the back," (P26: 465). After bringing up her feelings to her mother though, Lila said, "[she] was like '[I] want nothing more than for you to have a relationship with them, don’t feel bad, and don’t feel like it’s like that, cause it’s not,'" (P26: 468-469). The explicit permission from her mother appears to have given her the peace of mind to feel close to both sides of the family, rather than feeling as though she was torn between the two. Overall, participants appeared to consider explicit encouragement from the
residential parent about their relationship with the nonresidential parent’s family as a stress and guilt reliever, making them feel more secure and comfortable in their relationship with their nonresidential parent’s side of the family.

**Managing family crisis.** A fifth turning point that participants explained that made them feel more like family was managing family crisis. There were two reasons participants cited when reporting this as a turning point for them. The first, most often stated reason, was that during times of crisis, the nonresidential parent’s family reached out to the stepchild, and occasionally the residential parent and stepfamily as well. This extra effort by the nonresidential parent made stepchildren feel more like family because they described that it made them feel that, despite the divorce and remarriage, when things went badly, the family was still going to be there to support them. For instance, after her parents divorced and her mother began dating someone new, Leslie’s nonresidential parent’s family openly expressed their desire to keep her as part of the family and to help her through the unpleasant experience. She said, “ways that they made me feel better was they’d say, you know, ‘no matter what, we’re always here for you. We’re going to get you through this, even though it’s a tough time,’” (P8: 209-210). She stated that this reaction from them made her feel that she was not alone during a stressful time in her life.

All of the participants had to interact and negotiate how to maintain their relationships with their nonresidential parent’s family after a divorce and remarriage. However, for several participants, after their parents divorced, the nonresidential parent passed away, creating yet another challenge in their relationship with the nonresidential parent’s family. For the three stepchildren who experienced this though, all expressed
that the nonresidential parent’s family went out of their way to continue including the stepchild, which made them feel more like family. Aaron was one stepchild whose biological father passed away about two years after his mother remarried. He described:

I felt as if I was tighter with my family just because there was more of an attempt and effort on my father’s side of the family to be inclusive, like to make sure [my brother] and I were included in various events. (P16: 310-312)

Similarly, a less serious, but still upsetting family crisis that made Nadia feel more like family with her nonresidential parent’s side was an accident she was involved in:

…I remember me and my biological sister and then my oldest stepsister, we all got in a pretty bad car accident. Luckily no one was hurt too bad, but the car was totaled and I had to get rushed to the hospital cause I had hit my head, and was put in a neck brace and I guess it kind of meant a lot that they all called me to make sure that, like my dad, like I had called my dad and told him what happened, and he called his parents and their brothers and sisters and they sent me get well cards, like I wasn’t hurt, but it just meant a lot that they were still caring. (P19: 351-357)

Even though the gesture of sending cards was small, Nadia described that she felt more like family with her nonresidential parent’s family during this incident because their support helped her feel comforted in a time of crisis.

A second reason participants explained that dealing with family crisis made them feel more like family is, much like the first theme, linked to reminiscing. In David’s case,
when his grandfather was diagnosed with, and later passed away from cancer, the unhappy experience made him think back to better times, making him feel more like family with the nonresidential parent’s family as a whole. He said, “…like the emotions I felt and all the events I looked back on just made me really feel like closer to that family,” (P6: 305-306). Despite the loss of one of his nonresidential parent's family members, he was still able to feel closer to the group overall. Thus, even small gestures or seemingly upsetting events can make stepchildren feel closer to their family if they perceive it helps them manage a family crisis. Next, I discuss the turning points which participants explained as making them feel less like family with their nonresidential parent’s family.

**Turning points that made stepchildren feel less like family with nonresidential parent’s family**

My analysis of these data found that there were five categories of turning points which stepchildren reported as making them feel less like family with the nonresidential parent’s family: (a) developing relationships with the stepfamily, (b) spending time with the nonresidential parent’s family, (c) relocating, (f) participating in rituals, and (g) conflicting or disagreeing. Although the first three categories were labeled above as turning points that made stepchildren feel more like family, some participants also felt these turning points made them feel less like family, which is why they are included in both themes. I discuss these repeated themes first, beginning with how developing relationships with the new stepfamily made some stepchildren feel less like family with the nonresidential parent’s family.
Developing relationships with the new stepfamily. While some stepchildren found that getting to know their new stepfamily and extended stepfamily made them reminisce about and feel more like family with their nonresidential parent’s family, others expressed that the process of their stepfamily’s development made them feel less like family with their nonresidential side. Participants discussed this as a turning point which made them feel less like family with their nonresidential parent’s family for two reasons. First, quantity of communication became an issue. Participants explained that the time and effort it took to develop relationships with the stepfamily took them away from the nonresidential parent’s side of the family. Stepchildren described missing time, often holidays and birthdays, with the nonresidential parent’s family because they were with their new stepfamily and extended made them feel left out of the nonresidential group. Aaron spoke about feeling loyalty conflicts while getting to know his new family:

I realized that like I had to, I realized that there was a need to fit a whole new family into what I already had. Like all the sudden I’ve got a stepfather, stepbrothers, and I’ve got the new dad and new grandparents, and new extended family and familial like obligations like reunions to go to that I didn’t before and for me, sometimes I felt that those interactions, I was being, I felt like I was betraying my father and my father’s family.

(P16: 250-255)

Randy echoed these concerns in his discussion of going on vacation with his new stepfamily as a turning point that made him feel less like family with his dad’s side of the family. He stated the reason behind this:
Probably cause I, when I had gone vacation before, I went on vacation with my dad and we met up with other brothers or sisters of his that, in like Colorado is where we went one time. We met up with one of my uncles, aunts and uncles and then his aunt and uncle we met up with too. That was probably like, pretty high on the scale for relationship with my dad’s side, but then we went on this vacation and my dad wasn’t there and none of my cousins, aunts, and uncles were there or anything. So kinda just felt distant from them and since I was even farther away from them now, being in a different state. (P2: 442-449)

Thus, regardless of whether the developing stepfamily relationships were negative or positive, some of the stepchildren said that spending time with the stepfamily took away from the amount of time they were able to spend with their nonresidential parent’s family, making them feel less involved and less like family with the nonresidential side.

The second reason participants discussed spending time with the stepfamily resulting in them feeling less like family with the nonresidential side is because sometimes their stepfamily relationships became stronger than the relationships they had with their nonresidential parent’s family. Lila explained that although she and her stepsister had problems with each other at first, they eventually became more connected, making her less interested in investing effort in relationships with her nonresidential parent’s side of the family. She stated, “I guess in 2003, me and [my stepsister] got really close, and became friends and I guessed it pulled me more towards my [stepfamily]…” (P26: 300-302). Once the relationship became more positive, Lila began to see herself more as part of the stepfamily group, and less as a member of the nonresidential parent’s group, a
feeling which she expressed was greatened by the absence of her nonresidential parent in her life.

**Spending time with nonresidential parent’s family.** A second turning point which made participants feel less like family with their nonresidential parent’s family was spending time with the nonresidential parent’s family. In the discussion above, participants who discussed time spent with their nonresidential parent’s family as a turning point which made them feel more like family highlighted the importance of not just interaction, but the quality of the communication during those interactions. Likewise, participants who described that spending time with the nonresidential parent’s family made them feel less like family spoke of the salience of quality communication, and the lack thereof during interactions with the nonresidential parent’s family in which they felt less like family. Participants noted that awkwardness between themselves and their nonresidential parent’s family was the driving force behind the lack of feeling like family during these turning points. For instance, Darren spoke of an incident in which his nonresidential parent’s family spoke negatively about his residential parent during a Fourth of July celebration, which led him to feel less like family with the nonresidential group. He stated:

I was at my mom’s or whatever, and her family came over and my dad wasn’t there, and I was waiting for my dad to come cause he’s like bringing me fireworks or whatever, and I just remember, they, I was just there all day and they were like ‘where’s your dad?’ And I was like ‘well, he’s not here.’ And they were like ‘oh, well, is he coming by?’ And I was like “no. I think he’s supposed to come later to bring me some fireworks.” “Oh, well what’s he
Darren said he spent the rest of the day avoiding his family because of how they spoke of his father. Therefore, even though they were gathered for a celebration, the comments against his father made him feel separated from his nonresidential parent’s side of the family. Helen also discussed a turning point in which spending time with her nonresidential parent’s side of the family made her feel less connected to them. This incident became awkward for her when her nonresidential parent, her father, began joining her and her siblings’ outings with their grandparents.

I think my dad started dating someone. So, more often than not when we were with [my grandparents], he would be there as well with his new girlfriend, so it kind of took the attention away from us more to my dad’s situation and doing what they wanted to do instead of my grandparents trying to be with us. (P21: 184-187)

Once again, even though the family was getting together to spend time with one another, because her father and his girlfriend were there, Helen felt her grandparents put less effort toward interacting with her and her siblings, thus making her feel less like family with them. Even though it would make sense that stepchildren spending time with the nonresidential parent’s family would be important in developing and maintaining feelings of family, clearly there are situations in which spending time together backfired, leaving the stepchild feeling less connected and family identification with the nonresidential parent’s family.
**Relocating.** Third, relocating made some participants feel less like family with the nonresidential parent’s family. While relocation brought some stepchildren physically closer to their nonresidential parent’s family, making them also feel emotionally closer, more often, relocation, whether it was the stepchild away moving with the stepfamily, or one of the nonresidential parent’s family members moving away from the stepchild, resulted in a greater geographic distance from the nonresidential family. This often also lessened the quantity of communication, at least face-to-face, that the stepchild was able to have with their nonresidential parent’s family. Donna described feeling less like family with her nonresidential parent’s family after some of them relocated to another state. She explained, "Well, you know, like when my aunt and uncle moved out to Montana, I would say that we didn’t see them as much and there was less communication there, so I would say [feeling like family] dropped," (P15: 284-286). While Darren spoke of relocating to his mother’s home as a turning point that made him feel more like family, as discussed above, he also expressed that when he made the decision to live with his father permanently, it made him feel less like family with his mother’s side because of their negative responses:

> I had my mom feeling like she was incompetent I guess, like not able to take care of me, not able to do things for me, and I also had her family thinking why does he want to go live with him and cause isn’t [his dad] talking to “that woman” now. (P9: 349-352)

The relocation of the nonresidential parent themselves was also a turning point for some participants. Jane described that once her father moved to a
different state, it made her feel less like family with her dad’s family, even though she still lived in the same city as them.

…I always felt like a hassle to people because my dad wasn’t there, so they would always have to call me to tell me about family dinners and the difference was is that my dad would call to my uncle every day, so if there was a family dinner, like it’d just come up in conversation, or if there’s a family dinner, it’d be planned at like the store, like my aunts would know about it, so and the family would know about it by the end of the day, so it wasn’t like a big planned deal. They would just come up with it on like Friday, but with my dad gone, they would have to plan in certain cases, cause I would have other things on Sunday now that my dad was gone. I became more of a hassle. They would have to come get me or they’d drop me off, or I’d have to get picked up, so I would feel that I was more away from the family because I was more of a hassle. (P17: 404-416)

One participant, Leslie, temporarily stayed with her nonresidential parent’s family after her father passed away, before moving in permanently with her mother and stepfather. While she was physically closer to the nonresidential parent's family, she said relocating still made her feel less connected to the nonresidential parent's family group:

I kinda felt separated in a way from everybody cause, just at that age dealing with a divorce and all my cousins they had their families still together and I didn’t really understand why it was happening to me, so I guess I just kinda felt distanced in a way. (P8: 245-248)
Leslie noted specifically her nonresidential parent’s family’s negative comments toward her stepfather and the nonresidential side’s higher financial status as her reasons for why she felt as though she did not belong in the group, despite living in the same home with them. Overall, participants described relocating as making the participants feel less like family much more often than when they described it as making them feel more like family.

(Not) Participating in rituals. Fourth, participating in rituals, or in some instances a lack of an invitation to participate in rituals, made many of the participants feel less like family. During the interviews for the present study, when I asked participants what “family” meant to them, they often mentioned the celebration of rituals as something that is family oriented, and that the lack of being present or included in these rituals, such as Christmas gatherings, made them feel less like family with the nonresidential parent’s family. However, there was one major ritual in which stepchildren did participate in that still made them feel less like family with the nonresidential parent’s family. The remarriage of their residential parent was discussed as a turning point that signified the “end” of their family-of-origin and erected a new boundary in their relationship with their nonresidential parent’s side of the family. This ritual also rarely involved the presence of any nonresidential parent’s family members, which stepchildren explained as also making them feel less connected to the nonresidential parent’s side. For instance, Randy spoke of his mother’s remarriage:

Because every other wedding I had been to was mostly on my dad’s side of the family…But yeah, cause when they’d get married it would be like the entire family there, all my dad’s side but then this marriage with my
mom and my stepdad, none of my dad’s family was there, you know cause
they weren’t involved at all and so not seeing any of them there for a
wedding was kinda weird. (P2: 393, 396-399)

Jane also spoke of her mother’s remarriage as a turning point that made her feel
less like family with her nonresidential parent’s side of the family:

That was even more of a decrease in feeling like family cause that was the
year my parents got married, or my mom and my stepdad got married and it kind of made things final in that case, where I would permanently have a
male figure in my house that wasn’t my dad. (P17: 468-470)

This event appeared to be a “nail in the coffin” of the stepchild’s ties to
their old life, which in turn made them feel less like family with the nonresidential
parent’s family. Not being invited to partake in family rituals with the
nonresidential parent’s family also made participants feel less like family. Katie
described an instance when her biological father’s son, who her mother had raised
as her own, denied her residential family an invitation to his wedding, making her
feel less like family with that group.

[My mom] had found out about the wedding and called him to
congratulate him and see when it was and he had expressed that it would
probably be better if he wasn’t there cause my dad would be there and his
parents would be there and he was like it’s just us being me and her’s day
and we don’t want any drama, so my mom was really upset by that. (P4:
266-269)
Jane also discussed feeling left out of the nonresidential family as she began realizing they were leaving her out of rituals once her father moved to a different state:

> At [age] nine and ten [feeling like family] faded a lot when I would [only] go to birthdays, or they would forget to tell me about things, and I would drive by my grandma’s house and see all the cars there…” (P17: 502-504)

Participants who were left out of rituals expressed that it made them feel as though the nonresidential parent’s family was attempting to exclude them, which often resulted in them reducing their own efforts at maintaining the relationship.

Both the presence and absence of rituals were noted as important to the level of family identification with the nonresidential parent’s family by almost all of the participants.

**Conflicting or disagreeing.** A fifth and final turning point that made participants feel less like family with the nonresidential parent’s family was conflict with the nonresidential family. Although several instances of conflict between the stepchildren and nonresidential parent’s family have been discussed already, the following exemplars come from situations in which the participants described the conflict as the main reason they considered the incident a turning point. It is also important to note that these conflicts all centered around the participants’ perceptions that the nonresidential parent’s family was ganging up on someone in the residential family. Thus, even though the negativity from the nonresidential parent’s side was directed toward someone other than the child, the stepchildren still indicated it made them feel less like family with the nonresidential parent’s family. Joel explained that when his nonresidential parent’s side
of the family became involved in the divorce settlement between his parents, it made him go from feeling 100 percent like family to feeling nothing at all like family:

Uh, ironically, that entire side of the family, they’re all lawyers, so they got involved with it and they kind of split our family apart cause they were the ones you know taking custody away from my dad, which we didn’t want, just they were the working force behind all that… I didn’t interact with them at all, but I just knew what they were doing. My dad would show me the court documents that he was giving away at least 75% of his paycheck to [my mom] which is like unheard of, but they’re pretty good lawyers and they know all the judges, so they got it done. (P3: 236-239; 244-247)

After his mother’s family began their involvement, Joel said he and his siblings cut off all communication with their mother’s side of family, and at the time of the interview, had still not spoken to them, even though it had been several years since the incident. Several other stepchildren flagged a turning point as one that made them terminate communication with their nonresidential parent’s family. Another example of the nonresidential parent’s family ganging up on the residential family came from Jackie’s interview:

They came on their annual whatever visit and I remember that they didn’t treat my mother so nice and I remember, I think I probably noticed it, but then I think I heard from other people in the house, so I think I remember them talking about it as well, so that just reaffirmed it. So rarely did we receive phone calls from my grandparents, but then again, long distance
was very expensive then and I don’t think they had a great deal of money, but I do remember receiving a call after the visit and maybe it was the next time that they were going to come, or it was before they were going to come and they were calling, and they put me on the phone and I told them that I didn’t want to see them. I didn’t like the way they treated my mother. (P13: 128-137)

Jackie said she was 13 at the time of this incident, and after she told her grandparents to never return, they never spoke again, even though it has been more than 40 years since the event.

Not all conflict turning points discussed by the participants ended in complete termination of the relationship, yet all the stepchildren who spoke of conflicts with their nonresidential parents’ family, regardless of what the conflict were about, explained that it made them feel separated from the nonresidential group. Leslie expressed she felt less like family with her nonresidential parent’s family when they lied to her about something her nonresidential parent, her father, had done:

…my mom and [stepdad] were at a bank and my dad came in and was very upset about the whole situation and he threatened he was going to shoot both of them, in the bank! And the cops, well the bank ended up calling the cops on my dad and I remember asking my aunt about this, if this had actually happened cause my mom and Norm had told me about this because I wasn’t there when it happened. And my aunt said “oh no, that never happened.” So they were denying it, I guess. That made me
feel, I guess, less like family that they would try to hide something from me. (P8: 223-227)

In this example, the nonresidential parent’s side of the family’s attempt to protect one of their own simultaneously showed Leslie that she was not considered family as much as her father was, and made her question how much she could trust them, resulting in her feeling less like family with the entire group. Although conflict is important to relationships (Fisher, Rayner, & Belgard, 1995), for the participants in the present study, the nature of the conflicts they described were clearly hurtful to their level of family identification with the nonresidential parent’s family, some to the point of them completely removing themselves from the relationship for good. In the next section, I describe and illustrate trajectories I compiled after analyzing the 29 participants’ turning point graphs to highlight how the participants’ relationships with the nonresidential parent’s family are maintained during the first 48 months of their new stepfamily’s development.

**Turning Point Trajectories**

As I analyzed these data, it became clear that the participants' answers to the first two research questions could be grouped into patterns or trajectories as well. These trajectories exemplify the patterns of stepchildren's feelings of family (FLF), their relational development, with the nonresidential family over time. Out of my analysis of the 29 turning point interviews, I developed five turning point trajectories, which represent five themes of how much the stepchildren felt like family with their nonresidential parent’s family over the first 48 months of their stepfamily’s development. They are: (a) elevated and unchanging FLF, (b) deficient and unchanging FLF, (c) high
amplitude turbulent, (d) elevated and turbulent FLF, and (e) deficient and turbulent FLF. It is important to note that for many of the participants, the turning point trajectories only represent the first 48 months of stepfamily development that they were interviewed about. About half described that the nonresidential relationships were much stronger or weaker both before and after this time period, some instances of which I discuss below.

The titles I created for each trajectory include two terms. The first term indicates the developmental pattern of the trajectory (each trajectory is presented in tabular form below, with the pattern indicated as a red line), whereas the second term is a description by a participant in each category regarding what they would title their turning point graph (i.e. "Deficient and Unchanging FLF: The Black Hole"). The use of in-vivo coding for the second term highlights how the participants thought about their relationships with the nonresidential family, as well as further describes the trajectory category.

**Elevated and Unchanging FLF: "Just Because Your Parents are Divorced Doesn’t Mean We Don’t Still Love You”**

Stepchildren whose discourse I categorized into this trajectory indicated they felt 100% like family with the nonresidential parent’s family during every turning point in the first 48 months of their stepfamily’s development. Many of the participants whose experience followed this pattern said that their parents’ divorce was amicable, allowing their relationships with the nonresidential parent’s family to continue unabated and without much tension or renegotiation of familial boundaries. For instance, Carl described his continued interaction with his nonresidential parent’s family after his parents’ divorce, “Nothing really changed. I actually probably saw them more since I was with my dad every weekend,” (P11: 157-158). While the stepchildren may have initially
felt uncertain how the relationship would continue, the nonresidential parent’s family explicitly or implicitly showed their desire to keep things the way they always were.

Some participants who felt 100% like family through all turning points still spoke of turbulent times between their parents and different sides of the family, however. Bridget explained that after a tumultuous divorce when she was very young, her parents and extended family continued fighting, and still do so 30 years later. Despite all of this conflict between the different adults her perception of her relationship with her nonresidential parent’s side of the family never wavered from 100% feeling like a family. She explained, “There just was always complete acceptance, I always was their grandchild, there were not any barriers of the relationship,” (P22: 180-182). Below is a representation of the turning points experienced by participants in the “Elevated and Unchanging FLF” group.

Deficient and Unchanging FLF: “The Black Hole"

The stepchildren whose discourse I categorized into this second trajectory felt zero percent like family with their nonresidential parent’s family at all of the turning points.
points the described in the interview. They often discussed a conflicting or disagreeing turning point in which they, the nonresidential parent’s family, or both, terminated communication, leaving them not feeling like family at all. Most of the participants in this category expressed that they felt significantly more like family before the “conflicting or disagreeing” turning point. The participants’ heightened feelings of family with the nonresidential parent’s family were not charted for this group though, because they occurred before the first four years of the stepfamily’s development. One participant, Van, who felt zero percent like family during the entire 48 months of his stepfamily’s development said that rituals such as Christmas and Thanksgiving were turning points because they reminded him of how close he was to his new stepfamily and how little he felt for his nonresidential parent’s family. He explained, “…it was hard to really remember [my nonresidential side] to make that connection to, being so young and stuff. I don’t have the fond memories, or any memories really like my other siblings do who were 10 or 8 at the time,” (P1: 317-319). The rest of the stepchildren whose discourse I categorized into this trajectory spoke only of one turning point, a blowout with the nonresidential parent’s family, which resulted in termination of communication. Joel described the conflicting turning point at which his relationship with his nonresidential parent’s family dropped from almost 100% feeling like family to zero. Regarding his and his siblings’ decision to terminate communication with the nonresidential parent’s side, he described, “It just kind of happened cause we all just felt the same way. It’s like, you guys destroyed our family, I don’t want anything to do with you,” (P3: 383-384). Below is a representation of the turning points experienced by participants in the “Deficient and Unchanging FLF” group.
High-Amplitude Turbulent: “Chaos”

The participants whose discourse I categorized into the third trajectory described feeling like family with their nonresidential parent’s family as experiencing wildly up and down changes during the first 48 months of their stepfamily development. The title of this trajectory comes from Baxter et al.’s (1999) study of turning points in the development of stepfamilies, because, as they described in their findings, “This trajectory type was characterized by a roller coaster effect, with turning points that featured high amplitudes in change,” (p. 304), which the trajectory in my study mirrors. Several participants in the present study even echoed this in their interviews. For example, Ike expressed that his relationship with the nonresidential parent’s family “Felt like a roller coaster. Started out high, went low, then got back up,” (P28: 301). Darren had a similar explanation of his turning point graph and the development of his relationship with the nonresidential parent’s side of the family, explaining, “…there was a transition in love, with love being the love of my family members and feeling and me not feeling that same type of love, so it transition because of the roller coaster effect that it had,” (P9: 447-
The levels of feeling like family in the figure below, as well as in the final two figures, are a representation of what stepchildren in the categories described, as it was not possible to map the up and down movement of the individual respondent’s experiences onto one figure. In other words, what they had in common was the wild movement up and down, but at different times. Below is a representation of the turning points experienced by participants in the “High-Amplitude Turbulent” group.

**Elevated and Turbulent FLF: "Make the Most of What You’ve Got”**

Stepchildren's discourse which I categorized into the fourth trajectory discussed ups and downs in feeling like a family with the nonresidential parent’s family, but they still always felt *at least 50%* like family. The highs and lows they discussed were not as severe as those in the “High-Amplitude Turbulent” category. Randy spoke of the challenge in adjusting to the new stepfamily while maintaining former relationships with the nonresidential parent’s family as why his level of feeling like family was not always at 100%:
Just like having to adapt to your new family and because of adapting to your new family you kinda have to, my dad’s side of the family would have to adapt to us to deal with the divorce and new marriage and then we would have to adapt to them, either avoiding it or talking about those new issues that would arise. (P2: 542-545)

Ben also discussed the challenge of adapting to change as why, although the relationship with the nonresidential parent’s family was strong overall, had ups and downs over time. He described, “It was the two balancing family act and then when my dad got remarried, it was balancing all the families and trying to balance everything out, so that was probably the biggest things,” (P5: 457-459). Thus, perhaps the newness of the divorce and the stepfamily relationships give the once stronger stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family ties a challenge. Whether these relationships ever return to 100% feelings of family, or if new challenges arise in the future is unclear based on these data, thus an inquiry into established stepfamily and nonresidential parent’s family life is an important next step, which I discuss this in more detail in Chapter Five. Below is a representation of the turning points experienced by participants in the “Elevated and Turbulent FLF” group. As with the "High-Amplitude Turbulent" trajectory, the present trajectory represents the common ups and downs of the relationship, but not a common time at which the ups and downs were described.
Deficient and Turbulent FLF: "Family, but Only Around Christmas"

Finally, stepchildren's discourse which I categorized into the fifth trajectory also described ups and downs with their nonresidential parent’s family, but these stepchildren always felt less than 50% like family with the group. As the label of this trajectory suggests, interactions with the nonresidential parent’s family were infrequent, which the participants said kept them from successfully developing and/or maintaining the relationships. Trent described that his relationship with the nonresidential side of the family, “Mostly revolve[s] around holidays. I really didn’t have a relationship outside, or with [my grandmother], outside the holidays,” (P10: 387-388). Some participants spoke of their contact with the nonresidential parent’s family as an obligation, that they would have preferred to terminate communication, but only continued because of a sense of duty to the family and/or their nonresidential parent. Tye said during the first 48 months of his stepfamily’s development that he began disliking his visits to the nonresidential side of the family because of how he perceived they began to treat him differently. He explained, “They’re fake. It’s really obvious and they force conversation. It’s not like,
families should be able to talk to each other and it’s not like that at all,” (P27: 311-312).

Once again, the figure below illustrates only a shared description of the direction of the stepchildren's relationship with their nonresidential parent's family, but when these ups and downs were felt was different for each participant. Below is a representation of the turning points experienced by participants in the “Deficient and Turbulent FLF” group.

![Graph showing Stepchildren's Communication with the Nonresidential Family](image)

Overall, in answer to the first and second research questions, my participants were able to describe a variety of turning points with the nonresidential parent’s family and how much they felt like family over time, which I compiled into trajectories, visually representing the experiences of these stepchildren. I now summarize the main findings of this chapter, followed by a discussion of the implications.

**Summary of the Chapter**

In this chapter I addressed the first research question, “What are the turning points in stepchildren’s communication with their nonresidential parent’s family?” followed by a second question, “How do stepchildren perceive family identification with their nonresidential parent’s family during each turning point?” In response to these research
questions, in my analysis of the discourse of these stepchildren, I delineated five categories of turning points that made them feel more like family with the nonresidential parent’s family: (a) developing relationships with the stepfamily, (b) spending time with the nonresidential parent’s family, (c) relocating, (d) receiving encouragement from the residential parent, and (e) dealing with family crisis. I also found five categories of turning points as making them feel less like family with the nonresidential parent’s family: (a) developing relationships with the stepfamily, (b) changing relationships with the nonresidential parent’s family, (c) relocating, (d) participating in rituals, and (e) conflicting or disagreeing. In addition, I was able to examine the turning point graphs holistically and categorized them into five trajectories illustrating the patterns of stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family relationships: (a) elevated and unchanging FLF, (b) deficient and unchanging FLF, (c) high amplitude turbulent, (d) elevated and turbulent FLF, and (e) deficient and turbulent FLF.

Discussion of the Chapter

In this section, I highlight five implications of the results of Chapter Three regarding: (a) rituals, (b) stressful events, (c) everyday talk, (d) parental encouragement, and (e) ties to former researchers’ trajectories. First, I expand on the salience of rituals for the participants in the present study.

**Rituals.** First, the importance of rituals, both the presence and absence of them, came up in almost every interview for the present study. Participants consistently referred to events such as Christmas, birthday celebrations, or weekly lunches as impacting their levels of feeling like family with the nonresidential parent’s family members. This finding supports previous researchers’ work on stepfamilies, in which
they found that stepfamily members frequently cited ritual as impacting their feelings of family with the new stepfamily, both positively and negatively (Baxter et al., 1999).

Goffman (1967) defines a ritual as an activity, “however informal and secular … [which] represents a way in which the individual must guard and design the symbolic implications of his acts while in the immediate presence of an object that has a special value for him” (p. 57). In other words, he argues that ritual implies a moral value is at stake if we do not act in a way that preserves that value. So then it is not simply the act of getting together for holidays or weekly dinners that is important, but the meaning behind it that we rely on. In a family context, ritual can be defined as “complex behavioral practices that are acted out systematically over time,” (Kiser, Bennett, Heston, & Paavola, 2005, p. 358). For the stepchild and nonresidential parent's family then, they are challenged to keep the integrity of their old rituals alive, even if the stepchild cannot necessarily attend as many. Ritual life in families is important because it reinforces the family identity and gives all members a shared sense of belonging (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006; Wolin & Bennet, 1985). However, cultural rituals can have an adverse affect on cohesion as well. If a stepchild has to miss or is not invited to engage in a family tradition or celebration these rituals, rather than being experienced as occasions where bonding is enhanced, may instead heighten feelings of loss, sorrow, and divided loyalty (Sager et al., 1983).

Stepchildren in the present study frequently spoke of rituals when asked to identify turning points and to describe what it meant to be "100%" family. They considered events like Christmas and Thanksgiving things that families "do." The topic of rituals came up in a variety of turning points that made them feel more or less like
family. For instance, stepchildren discussed rituals as both potentially helpful and hurtful in making them feel like family when they were spending time with the nonresidential parent's family. Certainly, spending time with the nonresidential parent's family during family traditions gave the stepchildren a sense of comfort and belonging. Some stepchildren, however, spoke of feeling less like family when they missed a nonresidential tradition or celebration, even if the nonresidential parent's side did not say or do anything to make them feel this way. They simply felt left out due to not being able to attend an event, whether the reason was because they moved away or were busy with their new stepfamily. The desire some participants indicated they felt for their relationships with the nonresidential parent’s family to stay the same as before the stepfamily started appeared to be satisfied by their continued participation in traditions and celebrations with the nonresidential parent's family. Part of success of these rituals, however, was the quality of communication between themselves and their nonresidential side. If they felt the communication was different, awkward, or tense after their parents' divorce and remarriage, the ritual resulted in just the opposite, making them feel less like family, as an outcast, someone who did not belong. The ritual became “empty” (Wolin & Bennett, 1984) for the participant, lacking meaning for them. For example, I discussed earlier in the chapter about how Darren’s normally pleasant Fourth of July celebration made him feel less like family because his nonresidential parent's family spoke down about his residential parent, as well as spoke down about his desire to spend time with both the nonresidential side and his father together. It is possible the nonresidential side saw Darren's waiting around for his father to join them as an insult to "their time" with
him. However, their approach to letting Darren know this resulted in him seeing himself as separate from the nonresidential group, and isolating himself for the rest of the day.

In order to keep the ritual meaningful for all members, researchers suggest that the family needs to use the ritual to celebrate common family identity, as well as its history and future (Braithwaite et al., 1998; Wolin & Bennet, 1984). Thus, the family would also need to be flexible and adaptable in their use of ritual to recognize the changing nature of family over time, as well as individual family members’ needs (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). In stepfamilies, legitimacy of the “sacred object” being celebrated, such as a marriage or graduation, and the stepchild’s degree of involvement are also important for the stepchild to consider the ritual meaningful (Baxter et al., 2009). In the context of this present study, the nonresidential family members could help maintain their relationship with the stepchild by promoting rituals which hold meaning for all involved, in part by recognizing the stepchild’s new group membership with the stepfamily. If the nonresidential parent’s side of the family ignores this part of the stepchild’s identity, they run the risk of the stepchild no longer feeling connected to the ritual and the nonresidential side as a whole. If the stepchild has to miss a ritual with the nonresidential side, the nonresidential side should let the stepchild know they would be glad to have them there, but understand they have more than one familial commitment. They should do this without being forceful, not demanding the stepchild make a choice between themselves and the residential parent. This message will allow the stepchild to still feel included in the nonresidential side without making them feel guilty or cast aside for missing a family gathering.
Stressful Events. A second implication for the stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family relationship regards events the participants considered stressful and how they communicated with their nonresidential parent’s family during those events. Participants discussed an array of stressful events as turning points in the present study. Not all of these events made the participants feel less like family with the nonresidential family, however. In fact, all of the "family crisis" turning points served to make them feel much closer with their nonresidential parent’s family, which complements Baxter et al.’s (1999) discovery that stepfamily members frequently designated family crisis as mostly positive on the members’ levels of feeling like family with their stepfamily, bringing the stepfamily closer together, at least for some time. Additionally, according to former researchers' findings, family support during times of crisis allows the family overall to be more resilient to negative times and change (Greeff, Vansteenwegen, & DeMot, 2006). In the interviews for the present study, stepchildren explained that they felt their relationships were strengthened with the nonresidential parent's family during these times of crisis because of the nonresidential side's extra effort to help them through it. Although many of the crisis events may have been just as hard to manage for the nonresidential side, their extra effort was noted by the stepchild and made the stepchild feel included in the nonresidential family, as well as help them deal with the event. From the present participants' descriptions of turning points, an explicit reminder that the stepchild was still part of the nonresidential parent's family appeared particularly important when the crisis involved the addition of another potential barrier being placed in the stepchild’s relationship with the nonresidential side, such as the death of their nonresidential parent.
Negative events which always made stepchildren feel less like family in the present study were “conflicting or disagreeing” turning points, which again parallels Baxter et al.’s (1999) findings in which stepfamily members reported conflict as the second most frequent turning point event, and one which mostly made them feel less like family with the stepfamily. It is unsurprising that negative interaction made the participants in both Baxter et al’s (1999) study and the present study feel less like family, yet it was surprising in the present study how most of their turning points in this category focused not on conflicts between themselves and the nonresidential family, but between their residential stepfamily and the nonresidential family. The participants described these instances as the nonresidential parent’s family "ganging up" on their residential stepfamily, causing loyalty conflicts for the stepchild. Afifi (2003) found that in post-divorce families, children perceive showing loyalty to one member of the family also simultaneously showing disloyalty to the other. She explained, “The children may be able to maintain equitable relationships with each of their parents, but endure an incredible amount of stress and guilt in the process,” (p. 730). This may leave the children feeling torn between their parents and confused as to how to show equal loyalty to both.

The participants in the present study also discussed feeling “torn” or having loyalty conflicts when their nonresidential parent’s side would say or do negative things toward the stepfamily, yet for the participants in the present study, the residential side inevitably won this battle. According to Afifi’s (2003) findings, when former spouses were able to continue an amicable relationship, it minimized the likelihood of the child feeling caught between them, yet the children often identified their situations as hostile before the parents did. Therefore, Afifi (2003) suggested that family members work to be
open and direct in their confrontations with one another to avoid suffering loyalty issues in silence. While many stepchildren in the present study described that they kept quiet during conflicting turning points out of respect for the adults in the family, their bottled up frustration occasionally resulted in a decision to terminate communication with the nonresidential side, thus speaking about problems before they become too big would help individuals in this context. However, since the stepchild’s first reaction may be to avoid the problem, nonresidential family members cannot assume that when the stepchild is quiet it means they are fine with any hurtful words or actions toward the residential stepfamily. If the nonresidential side wishes to maintain a positive relationship with the stepchild, they also need to remember the stepchild is a member of more than one family group, and monitor their actions with the child’s residential family to keep the stepchild from feeling as though they have to pick sides.

**Everyday Talk.** Third, participants’ discourse about their everyday talk with the nonresidential parent’s family has implications for the relationship. While stepchildren spoke of some major blowouts with their nonresidential parent's family, the majority of their turning points surrounded and involved everyday talk, or seemingly normal, run of the mill, day-to-day conversations which can include joking around, recapping events, and gossiping (Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996). Despite the ordinary nature of everyday talk, it is within these interactions that scholars argue researchers can "focus on communication as the primary means by which family members shape personal identities, and build, enact, and transform family relationships," (Schrodt, Soliz, & Braithwaite, 2008, p. 191), and can contribute to satisfying relationships in stepfamilies (Schrodt et al., 2008).
Thus, from the results in the present study I can argue that even the little things matter to stepchildren, such as offhand remarks or sending get-well cards, as was evident in the exemplars throughout the chapter. This also means that practically anything that is said or done has the potential to contribute to the stepchild's feelings of family with the nonresidential side. While I am not encouraging family members to fervently censor what they say, perception checking with the stepchild to make sure they understand the messages and are not feeling excluded will likely help them maintain their relationship more successfully (Stiff, Dillard, Somera, & Sleight, 1988).

Parental Encouragement. Fourth, "Receiving encouragement from the residential parent" was spoken about the least out of all the turning point categories for respondents in the present study. As discussed earlier, much of the encouragement stepchildren said they perceived came from their residential parent's silence regarding the nonresidential parent's family, which they did not consider a turning point. The two participants who were able to recall specific instances of explicit encouragement from the residential parent for the stepchild to continue their relationship with the nonresidential parent's side explained that these conversations allowed them to feel less stressed about juggling multiple sides of the family. Since the former spouses’ relationship is the primary predictor of the child’s contact with their nonresidential parent (Blow & Daniel, 2002), it would make sense that the residential parent also has an important role in the child’s continued relationship with the nonresidential parent’s family. Thus, residential parents should speak to their child(ren) about their desires and feelings about managing time with three or more sides of the family in order to find out what they need.
Ties to Former Researchers’ Trajectories. The trajectories of the stepchild and nonresidential parents' family's relationship discovered in this study resemble some former researchers' findings in similar contexts, such as stepfamilies (Baxter et al., 1999) and post-divorce relationships (Graham, 1997). Specifically, the "High-Amplitude Turbulent" trajectory path is visually and conceptually similar to Baxter et al.'s (1999) trajectory of the same name, as well as Graham's (1997) "Disjoined Erratic Cycle" and "Disrupted Progress" which illustrate a series of highs and lows all over the figure throughout the entire time period. In the present study, "Elevated and Unchanging FLF" was also similar to Graham's "Sustained Adjustment" in which Graham's participants expressed their commitment to the post-divorce relationship as consistently high, though not always at 100 percent, as was the case for "Elevated and Unchanging FLF." These similarities across studies suggest that we can see common patterns of development across relational types. In particular, the three contexts, new stepfamilies, divorced couples, and stepchildren and nonresidential family members, all represent situations in which family members are transitioning into a new family form, which can be rife with change and ambiguous boundaries (Baxter et al., 1999; Boss, 2002). Researchers examining similar contexts in which individuals experience major change in their family or relational form can look to these trajectories to better understand the general pattern of relational development and maintenance a person might experience in these situations.

An obvious difference between the current study’s findings and former researchers’ discoveries was the context. Baxter et al. (1999) focused on the stepfamily unit, Graham (1997) focused on the relationship between the divorced couple. Thus, in the present study I was able to add to the literature by exploring turning points in a new
context which was previously overlooked. More importantly, I was able to illustrate through the relational development trajectories that the stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family, while an already established relationship, can potentially continue to have ups and downs in their feelings of family with one another. Not only do the nonresidential family members and stepchild have to negotiate new relationships with the new stepfamily members, but they must also communicate and manage their place in the family, even though they are still blood-related and have not chosen the divorce and remarriage. Thus, while the trajectories across the three studies may appear similar in some respects, the challenges within each context can vary. Researchers can use this finding to further support the idea that even established relationships can go through confusing times of change, during which family members may question their roles and new boundaries.

Next, Chapter Four expands on how participants in the present study altered, or accommodated, based on their perceptions of group membership during the turning points above, as well as their motivations for doing this. I also describe the participants' perceptions of how their nonresidential parent's family accommodated their communication during interactions with the stepchild, as well as their motivations for accommodating, or not.
CHAPTER FOUR:
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Stepchildren’s Motivations for Accommodation and Perceptions of Nonresidential Parent’s Family’s Motivations for Accommodation

Overview of Chapter

For my third and fourth research questions I asked, “How, if at all, do stepchildren accommodate their communication in interactions with their nonresidential parent’s family members over time?” and “What are stepchildren’s motivations for accommodating, or not, in interactions with their nonresidential parent’s family members over time?” I also examined how stepchildren in the present study perceived their nonresidential parent’s family’s communication by asking my fifth and sixth research questions, which were, “How, if at all, do stepchildren perceive their nonresidential parent’s family accommodating over time?” and “What are stepchildren’s perceptions of their nonresidential parent’s family’s motivations for accommodating, or not, over time?” According to researchers who developed Communication Accommodation Theory, which is the driving theory for the present study and this particular results chapter, individuals will use communication, verbal and/or nonverbal, to acquire a desired social distance between themselves and others (Shepard et al., 2001). The main factors behind individuals’ choices in speech and nonverbal behaviors are their perception of the relationship and social distance desires (Harwood et al., 2006). In using this theory to answer the final four research questions, I was able to examine how and why stepchildren in the present study communicated and adapted, or accommodated, in interactions with their nonresidential parent’s family when group membership, or family identification,
becomes salient. The participants’ perceptions of their nonresidential family’s accommodation and motivations will also give insight into how the participants account for their family’s behavior, as well as further illustrate their assumptions regarding familial group membership.

I devote the remainder of Chapter Four to an explanation of the above mentioned accommodation strategies, how they are manifested through communication behaviors, and the participants’ perceived motivations behind them. On the following page in Table 2, I present an overview of the results from the third and fourth research questions, as well as definitions of each accommodation strategy and motivation category. I discuss the strategies and motivations together in the table and the findings even though they came from two different research questions. This allows me to highlight which motivations were behind which of the stepchildren’s strategies. Later on in the chapter, I present Table 3, which fulfills the same function for research questions five and six. I summarize my findings on the stepchildren’s perceptions of their nonresidential parent’s family’s accommodation strategies and motivations. Below, I begin with a summary of the results for research questions three and four and then present Table 2.

**Stepchildren’s Accommodation and Motivations in Communication with the Nonresidential Family**

During the interviews wherein stepchildren identified their turning points with the nonresidential parent’s family, I asked each of the participants to describe as much of the specific communication during their interactions with the nonresidential family as they could recall. I sought to identify what the stepchildren did or said in these interactions, as well as what their reasoning was behind their behaviors. Their answers demonstrated that
stepchildren in the present study accommodated their communication based on a variety of motivations, as illustrated in Table 2. In response to research questions three and four, in which I asked about stepchildren’s accommodation and motivations, I describe the accommodation strategies I uncovered in the discourse of the participants, how the strategies were manifested in their behaviors, and the motivations behind the strategies next, including representative quotes from the interviews to further illustrate the themes.

Table 2

An Overview of Stepchildren’s Accommodation Strategies and Motivations in Interactions With Their Nonresidential Parent’s Family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accommodation strategy &amp; Behaviors</th>
<th>Accommodation strategy definition</th>
<th>Motivation(s) to alter social distance with nonresidential parent’s family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discourse Management</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Topic avoidance</td>
<td>Focus on others’ conversational needs</td>
<td>1. Convergence (lessen distance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Full disclosure</td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Maintenance (perpetuate same distance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3. Complement (maintain status difference)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Control</td>
<td>Attempt to direct course of conversation/relationship</td>
<td>1. Divergence (increase distance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Acting out</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Terminating communication</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Discourse Management

Discourse management is the first and most frequent strategy stepchildren used to accommodate in interactions with their nonresidential parent’s family. Individuals accommodating with this strategy focus on the others’ conversational needs. Participants in the present study accomplished this by altering their choice in topics when interacting
with the nonresidential family, particularly through two behaviors: topic avoidance and full disclosure.

**Topic avoidance.** The majority of the participants described avoiding certain topics, such as their residential parent and their new stepfamily, in their interactions with the nonresidential parent’s family. The motivations behind this, however, varied. Convergence, or to speak and act more like the other (Giles, 2008), was the first motivation for topic avoidance with the nonresidential parent’s family. Convergence is often a motivation when individuals want to be accepted and liked by a group (Chen & Starosta, 2004), thus when stepchildren attempted to act like them it was in hopes of lessening the social distance between themselves and the family. Lila described wanting to make sure her nonresidential family did not become angry at her for having a new stepfather and extended stepfamily, so she avoided the topic of the stepfamily as much as possible:

They were adults, so I think maybe it wasn’t awkward for them, but maybe they just wanted to know how my mom was doing, and wondered how [my stepfather] was and I think just being a little kid, and when you’re a little kid you want to please everyone and you want, you don’t want someone to be mad at you, so if you talk about your stepdad, is that going to make your grandma mad at you? So you just kind of answer, really quick answers, like, oh they’re good! What’s for supper? (P26: 278-283)

Lila expressed that now that she is an adult, she understands her nonresidential family was simply trying to be supportive and interested in her new stepfamily, but as a child,
the fear of them seeing her as different, or more a part of the stepfamily than the nonresidential family, motivated her to avoid the topic of the stepfamily altogether in an attempt to show she was still a part of the nonresidential side. Jane spoke of avoiding the topic of her mother as a challenge she had to take on in order to keep her nonresidential parent’s side happy and herself feeling included. She described:

I always felt when I was over there that my mom was kind of a, like the word you don’t say, like the person who, you know, like Voldemort in Harry Potter, like you can’t mention that name. Just because of the fact that like she was the one that divorced my dad and the divorce was so brutal. Like I didn’t know that when I was that young, but I just kind of got that vibe that when I brought up my mom’s name, people were like tense. (P17: 320-325)

She explained that although she was very close to her mother and wanted to speak about her and speak up for her, she avoided the topic so the nonresidential side would still accept Jane as part of the them. Mary also described using topic avoidance to please her nonresidential parent’s family and remain included in the group. In her case, however, she avoided speaking of the stepfamily because she did not like her stepfather and did not want the nonresidential side to ask too many questions about him. Instead, she said she wanted to spend time focusing on their family and time together, so she would give brief answers to their questions about her home life:

Even as a kid, even as a kid I think we got that we were supposed to like [my stepfather], and then he, he didn’t have any real tangible bad qualities and so there wasn’t one point where I was like “I don’t like him” but I just
kind of think he was an odd duck. I think we felt conflicted. We would tell [the family] we liked him cause we knew our mom wanted us to like him and they would worry if we didn’t like him, so I think we tried to keep things like “he’s nice”, “he’s fine”, but we certainly weren’t volunteering like “he’s the greatest!” (P24: 216-221)

As I discussed briefly in Chapter Three, when Mary grew to be a few years older, she realized her nonresidential family also did not like her stepfather and was able to converge by being open about her own dislike for him. This illustrates that as perceptions of group membership change over time, so will accommodation strategies.

Maintenance was the second motivation participants had for avoiding topics with their nonresidential parent’s family. This strategy involves keeping verbal and nonverbal communication the same, not attempting to gain or lessen social distance from the other at all (Giles, 2008). Individuals using this strategy would not actively attempt to be more like or different from the other, but would keep their communication the same. Patrick described avoiding topics to maintain things the way they were with his nonresidential side of the family, specifically his grandparents, after his parents divorced and then both remarried:

I was actually probably OK with things the way they were because of the feeling caught, you know. I didn’t want to bring it up for fear of what she might say, so it was almost better that she didn’t bring it up and I was glad she didn’t bring it up and I was ok with it being like that…. It was an example of “Here’s a moment when I really don’t want to reduce the uncertainty for fear of what might be said.” So, I’m ok with the fact that
there was no talking about it with grandma and grandpa. (P14: 439-442, 444-446)

In Patrick’s example, he said that bringing up these topics had the potential of drastically changing his currently happy relationship with his grandparents because they might have had something negative to say about the situation. Therefore, topic avoidance, motivated by a desire to maintain the relationship the way it was, worked out for him, in part because it also appeared that his grandparents were using the same strategy and had the same motivation. He was never pressured, or asked at all, about his feelings regarding the divorce and remarriages, thus he was able to feel as included in the family as before.

Nadia also spoke about keeping quiet, or avoiding the topic of her mother and new stepfather, in order to keep things civil and the relationships with her nonresidential side the same as they were before the divorce. She did not attempt to utilize discourse management to converge, or be more like, her nonresidential side, but rather kept things to herself to be able to continue, or maintain, the relationships with both sides of the family the way they were. Nadia explained, “I would never say anything, just cause I didn’t want to get in the middle, like I would want to stick up for my mom, but I didn’t want to get in the middle of a thing, cause I knew maybe my mom’s side better, but I never would say anything. I’d kinda keep it to myself,” (P19: 284-286). Even though both sides of the family were fighting around her, Nadia found that avoiding the topic of the residential side with the nonresidential side allowed her to continue her relationship with them unabated, and not become part of the fighting, as well as not feel as though she also had to bad mouth her mother when she was around them.
Complementing was a third motivation behind stepchildren using discourse management to avoid topics. Complementing means that individuals will engage in dissimilar behavior, but not in order to diverge (Giles, 2008). Rather, it is to highlight and reinforce status difference in the relationship. Several of the participants in the present study contended that respect for their elders, or complementing the status of their nonresidential parent’s family members, was their motivation behind avoiding topics. Even if they wanted to respond to negative remarks about their residential family or to themselves, they explained they felt it was not their place because of their young age. Darren said, “being younger I didn’t [talk back]…being young, I would hear [insults about my father] and I would just walk off,” (P9: 272-274). Because status or age difference was the main reason behind his description of this motivation to walk away from the situation, this example would not fit into the divergence or maintenance category. In a similar example, Leslie spoke of instances when her nonresidential side would bad mouth her stepfather and mother, but her perception of her place in the family kept her from saying anything:

I didn’t like it, just because I couldn’t understand how they felt this way towards my mom and they basically felt like it was my mom’s fault that all this happened, that the divorce happened, because of my mom and they put a lot of blame on her which I don’t think was right. Yeah, the family closeness with myself was pretty low during [‘96] and ‘97 also just because of everything going on…No, I wouldn’t really talk back to them because I was too young for my opinion to matter. (P8: 341-345, 350)
Although from the nonresidential side’s viewpoint the stepchildren avoiding the topic of their residential parent may have been seen as motivated by trying to converge or maintain, because the stepchildren saw this as a status issue, for them the motivation was complementing. Participants who expressed complementing as their motivation for avoiding topics with the nonresidential side did say, however, that as they grew older, they began to speak up, believing they had more status in the family.

**Full disclosure.** Full disclosure was a second behavior stepchildren in the present study engaged in which fit within the discourse management strategy. These stepchildren expressed that there were no taboo topics with the nonresidential side before or after the divorce and remarriage(s), and that they were comfortable disclosing anything that was on their mind. Unlike topic avoidance, there was only one motivation discussed as behind this behavior: convergence. In response to whether he ever felt there were any topics that he and his family did not talk about or avoided, Carl stated, “No, at that time I was so naive anyway I probably wouldn’t have noticed, but no it was all natural to me. I wasn’t holding anything back and I don’t think they were. I still don’t [hold anything back],” (P11: 266-267). Kaitlin also described an interest in disclosing private information to her nonresidential family, particularly to her grandmother, even after the divorce and her parents’ remarriages:

She was just a nurturer. She took care of us. She, like I said, she was the organizer of all the gatherings, she was the one who fed us and made whatever she knew we liked, and if she knew we were coming over we would specifically get those. She just took care of us, she was a nurturer,
so it was natural almost for me to confide in her cause she just had a very
caring personality. (P12: 462-466)

All participants who spoke about fully disclosing explained that an important part
of their motivation to converge was the nonresidential side first illustrated they had no
interest in using the private information to gossip or use as fodder. Some participants
whose discourse did not fit into this category expressed that they felt their nonresidential
side was “digging” for information, and that they avoided disclosing private information
because they felt perhaps the information would be used against the residential family or
themselves. Conversely, the stepchildren whose descriptions fell into the present category
said that confiding in their nonresidential family members made them feel closer and
more included in the nonresidential group. Although stepchildren in the present study
used discourse management in interactions with the nonresidential parent’s family
through topic avoidance and full disclosure, for a variety of motivations, I also found
through my analysis that some participants utilized interpersonal control in addition to or
instead of discourse management, depending on the situation.

**Interpersonal Control**

The use of interpersonal control revealed in the discourse of the participants in the
present study means that stepchildren attempted to communicate with the purpose of
directing the course of a specific conversation and/or the overall relationship with their
nonresidential side. They enacted this strategy through the behaviors of acting out and
terminating communication. Regardless of the behavior, the participants explained that
the use of this strategy came from only one motivation, divergence.
Acting out. Stepchildren were able to use interpersonal control through acting out, or going against their nonresidential parent’s family’s wishes or advice, and standing up to them in order to diverge from the nonresidential group, despite their young age. In fact, many of the participants who spoke of avoiding topics to converge with their nonresidential side, or complement the status of the family, also discussed instances when they believed the issue at hand was too important to stay silent or go along with the group, highlighting that accommodation strategies and motivation change depending on the situation. Jane described that while she often kept quiet about the topic of her mother because it caused tension within the family, she also had a breaking point. She explained, “But if my family would say that my mom was a bad mom, then yeah, I would voice out, just like ‘yeah, she’s not a bad mom.’ And then they would drop the topic, or they would say it like under their breath to somebody else... (P17: 393-396).

Darren also spoke of acting out by ignoring advice from his nonresidential side about living with his father. He remarked, “I was just kinda closed off, trying to be mature and handle it on my own,” (P9: 324-325). He described the nonresidential side’s negative reaction, saying that he still stuck to his decision to show that he was his own person, and not simply a member of the family who would follow their advice blindly. Some stepchildren explained that they went a step beyond acting out in an attempt to control the relationship with the nonresidential parent’s family, terminating communication with the group completely, which I discuss next.

Terminating communication. The use of interpersonal control with a motivation of divergence was also evident in the participants’ descriptions of terminating communication with the nonresidential side. As I anticipated, given the literature, this act
was to illustrate to the nonresidential side that the stepchild thought of themselves as different from the group, and were no longer interested in being included, or including the nonresidential side in the stepchild’s own definition of “family.” Katie explained that it was her nonresidential parent’s family’s attempt to trick her brother into seeing their estranged father that made her and her sibling cut off communication with the nonresidential side:

…[my brother] went to visit [our half brother], and he had expressed he didn’t want to see my dad, who was living in the state at that time. [Dad] had got back in connection with all his other kids, just not me and my brother. He was trying to, but me and my brother didn’t want to see him. So my brother was going to visit [our half brother] and he told the whole family that he didn’t want to see my dad and they tricked him into going to a restaurant where my dad was at and so he got on the next flight home and that’s when [we] stopped talking to them. (P4: 299-305)

Katie also described that the relationship she had with his mother’s side of the family filled any void she might have felt by not having her nonresidential side in the picture, making her uninterested in contacting them again. Similar examples of young stepchildren terminating communication with their nonresidential side were discussed in Chapter Three. These examples highlight that when the participants chose to act out or terminate communication with the nonresidential side, they still were able to use interpersonal control over the relationship, despite their young age. Next, I discuss stepchildren’s perceptions of their nonresidential parent’s family’s accommodation strategies and motivations.
Stepchildren’s Perceptions of Nonresidential Parent’s Family’s Motivations for Accommodation

In order to address research questions five and six, I also asked the participants to describe what the nonresidential parent’s family did or said during interactions with the participants, as well as what the stepchildren perceived the nonresidential side’s motivations were for their actions. Much like the results above, their answers highlighted that stepchildren perceived their relationships and communication with the nonresidential side in terms of group membership. In this section of Chapter Four, I further describe the participants’ perceptions of the nonresidential side’s accommodation strategies and motivations, including representative quotes from the interviews to further illustrate the themes. First, I have summarized the findings in Table 3 below.

Table 3
Overview of Stepchildren’s perceptions of their Nonresidential Parent’s Family’s Accommodation Strategies and Motivations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accommodation Strategy &amp; Behavior(s)</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Motivation(s) to alter social distance with stepchild</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discourse Management</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Selecting topics</td>
<td>Focus on others’ conversational needs</td>
<td>1. Convergence (lessen distance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Asking questions</td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Maintenance (perpetuate same distance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Storytelling</td>
<td></td>
<td>3. Divergence (increase distance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpersonal Control</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Exerting extra effort</td>
<td>Attempt to direct course of conversation/relationship</td>
<td>1. Convergence (lessen distance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Exerting less effort</td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Divergence (increase distance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpretability</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Accounting</td>
<td>Focus on others’ ability to understand</td>
<td>1. Convergence (lessen distance)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discourse Management

I was also able to categorize much of the participants’ discourse about their nonresidential parent’s family’s accommodation as discourse management. I found that stepchildren perceived that the nonresidential side enacted the discourse management strategy through selecting topics, asking questions, and storytelling. Stepchildren perceived a variety of motivations behind the behaviors, which I discuss for each behavior separately next.

Selecting topics. Slightly different than the “avoiding topics” behavior the stepchildren described of their own communication, “selecting topics” involved the nonresidential side choosing themes of conversation that did not involve the divorce or new stepfamily, but more because of disinterest or perceived unimportance to the present interaction than an attempt to avoid them. Unlike “avoiding topics,” the stepchildren did not feel their nonresidential side was actively staying away from things such as the stepfamily, but rather were more interested in keeping things the way they were by selecting topics that did not include the new family form. The stepchildren perceived one motivation behind this enactment of discourse management: maintenance. Patrick remarked that when he visited his grandparents, it was as though nothing had changed, despite the absence of his father and the addition of his new stepfather:

It’s funny, you know, grandma, I don’t know if she consciously did this, but she just never talked about it. In fact, the divorce, she never talked to us about that, never talked to us about the fact that mom and dad divorced, it was like she shifted gears and now it’s my mom and my stepfather and she took in [my stepfather] as her son-in-law, and never really made a
mention of my dad at all. So I think from her and their perspective, nothing ever really changed. (P14: 429-434)

Randy said that after his stepfamily had developed for a couple of years, members of his nonresidential parent’s family stopped talking about them because it was “old news.” [We] didn’t really talk about my mom’s marriage too much. No one really mentioned my mom too much just cause I don’t know. All my aunts and uncles liked my mom but she like kinda wasn’t a part of the family anymore, so there really wasn’t any issue there to talk about… (P2: 475-478)

Leslie also expressed that she perceived that her residential family did not speak about her mother because they considered it unimportant to the maintenance of the family and unrelated to the family events.

They, I think they just kinda acted like it didn’t happen. They just didn’t really care to know about anything that was going on, because at that point, they weren’t asking my mom to still come to family events or anything like that. P8: 330-332

Participants who described an example like this appeared to feel accommodated by their nonresidential family when the topic of their new stepfamily was not brought up. They explained that they appreciated the nonresidential family did not harp on the topic or try to get gossip from them, and they were happy to concentrate on the nonresidential family when they were with them, rather than talk about their new stepfamily. Conversely, some participants remarked that their nonresidential family utilized discourse
management through asking questions, making it clear they wanted to know more about
the stepchild’s home lives.

**Asking questions.** I found that stepchildren in the present study perceived their
nonresidential parent’s family had one of two motivations when they asked questions
about the new stepfamily: convergence or divergence. First, some participants stated that
when the nonresidential side asked about the new stepfamily, they were trying to show
interest in the stepchild’s life outside their time with the nonresidential side, or to
converge with the stepchild. Kristen described her nonresidential side showing no interest
in her new stepfamily, even refusing to visit her home when the new stepparent was
there, until her mother became pregnant with her half-brother. Once this happened, the
nonresidential side began getting involved by asking her about the pregnancy and her
own feelings on having a new brother coming. She expressed that this made her feel as
though they cared and included not just her, but the rest of her family in the group:

…but it was after it was clear that my mom’s and [stepfather]’s new life
was there to stay and she became pregnant and had [my brother] at this
point. They would ask about [him], but it felt like they actually cared.
They were like ‘how’s your little brother?’ and they were excited when,
cause I remember, when he was born, I was with my dad and so, I was
with my dad and my grandparents actually, and they brought me to the
hospital and were excited for me and that was a pretty high feeling like
family time. Having my dad’s family dropping me off to my mom’s side
and the excitement all around. (P20: 300-307)
Andrea said she felt her nonresidential family continually attempted to illustrate her inclusion in the family by asking about her residential parent’s well being:

They always asked about my mom. We didn’t ever really talk so much about it. I don’t remember a lot of conversations about her getting remarried. They probably would ask me if I liked my stepdad, if we were all getting along, but my dad’s side of the family has always been, they’ve always asked about my mom, even now. My parents haven’t been together in 30 years, my dad’s been dead for 12 years or something, but still whenever I see anyone, ‘how’s your mom?’ So, cause my parents always got along and stuff. There wasn’t really any negativity that I knew of.

(P23: 256-262)

Some stepchildren indicated that their nonresidential side used asking questions as a way to illustrate their dislike or distrust of the new stepparent. The motivation behind this use of discourse management was discussed with mixed perceptions, however. For Mary, when her nonresidential side asked harsh questions about her stepfather, saying that they were asking questions in order to protect her, which I categorized as convergence:

…[my stepfather] would do weird things like, so my mom changed her name to his name when they got married, and so he would put things like deliver to this last name and absolutely no one else on our mailbox, so like birthday packages and stuff that the [family] would send to us would get sent back, so of course would make everyone like, ‘what the fuck? Why is this getting returned? This is your address, I’ve sent things to you
before.’ So they’d be like ‘is he ok?’, things like that would make them wonder,” (P24: 226-232).

Other participants’ discourse illustrated that divergence was the motivation they saw behind their nonresidential side’s questions. While, like Mary’s example above, they contended the family was likely attempting to protect them and make sure the new stepparent was up to the job, their questioning served to separate the nonresidential side not only from the residential stepfamily group, but from the stepchild themselves. For instance, when Darren’s family attempted to diverge from his residential parent’s value system through asking Darren questions, about his father and new girlfriend, it resulted in Darren feeling separated also.

The [family] would just ask “Oh, so they live together?” And I would say yeah. “So they sleep in the same bed?” Yeah! My mom and dad have been divorced for this amount of time! “So you don’t have a problem seeing your dad sleep with another woman?” I’m like you know, “he’s grown, what do you mean?” I’m 13 now, I’m starting to grow a little, what’s wrong with a man sleeping with a woman after he’s been divorced for so long, so no. And they’re just like ‘how could he just talk to somebody else like that so fast?’ And I’m just like “ok. My mom has had boyfriends here and there, so.” (P9: 360-366)

Thus, participants perceived the nonresidential parent’s side’s questions in a variety of ways. For some, even when harsher criticism toward the stepfamily emerged as a result of the questioning I categorized it as convergence, but only if the questions stemmed from protection the participants themselves desired.
**Storytelling.** Storytelling was the third and final discourse management behavior the nonresidential parent’s family members utilized. Researchers have found that storytelling allows individuals to make sense of their lives and the events that unfold around them (Bochner, 2001). This practice allows families to “produce family culture, define family history, feature family uniqueness, develop identity, and display and establish family values,” (Poulos, 2009, p. 101). Thus, it makes sense that participants in the present study found their nonresidential parent’s storytelling a pleasant and convergent accommodating behavior. I categorized stepchildren’s perceptions of the nonresidential side’s storytelling under one motivation: convergence. Aaron described that he felt his grandparents were attempting to include him and his brother in the family when they would tell them stories during a yearly road trip they all took to California:

> A lot of [the trip] was talking about, they spent a lot of time talking about my dad, telling stories about my dad, but they were always, they were always paired with how then, what does this mean about being a good, a responsible young man and adult, so not only was it stories about family and our place in that family, but also life lessons about growing up and being a good person. (P16: 328-332)

The nonresidential side’s storytelling also served to help George feel more comfortable around them, since he did not know them very well before his parents’ divorce. He explained:

> We, I think when everybody started telling stories it kind of loosened everybody up, cause everybody had their own part to the story, or everybody had a story that related to it, so they were talking about stories
from when they were little, which was interesting to me to hear about them from everybody else’s point of view, cause I’d heard stories like that from my dad, but he was the youngest, so he didn’t have some of the stories other people had,” (P29: 228-233).

The stepchildren who provided storytelling examples remarked that it allowed them to see their place in the family, whether they were relatively new to the group, such as George, or were working on already established relationships in which members were unsure of their roles, as was the case for Aaron, because his father died shortly before the road trips began.

**Interpersonal control**

As stated earlier, interpersonal control is how individuals adapt communication based on power. The purpose of this strategy is to direct the communication, or take control of the situation/relationship. Stepchildren perceived their nonresidential parent’s family enacted interpersonal control through two behaviors, exerting extra effort and exerting less effort. Though researchers often describe interpersonal control through relatively negative examples, such as interrupting or babbling (Harwood et al., 2006), as a way to diverge from the other, some participants in the present study described instances in which their nonresidential family used this strategy in ways that I understood were in order to converge with the stepchild. This was the case when stepchildren perceived that the nonresidential family was exerting extra effort.

**Exerting extra effort.** For some of the participants, at some point during the first 48 months of their stepfamily’s development, they noted their nonresidential parent’s family exerting extra effort to increase or maintain contact with them, despite the addition
of the stepchild’s new stepfamily members. The stepchildren indicated that they perceived that this was an attempt to keep the relationship strong, even though the nonresidential parent’s family often had to go out of their way to do so. All participants who spoke of their nonresidential side exerting extra effort explained that they believed this behavior was in order to include, or converge with, the stepchild. When asked about the motivation behind his nonresidential parent’s family’s extra efforts to see him after the divorce and remarriages, Carl explained, “I think they did that just to, I don’t even know if they tried to do that. I think it was just natural, but obviously to make me feel accepted so I don’t feel like I’m not part of the family,” (P11: 280-282). Alan also remarked that he saw an outpouring of effort from his nonresidential parent’s side of the family after his parents’ divorce and his nonresidential parent’s death:

Like my grandparents, we took trips with them once a year for family reunions. They were just there for everything, birthdays, it was just whatever, whether it was, I mean, grandparents would be stopping by for birthday parties and stuff, aunts, uncles, if they were out of town, we’re still getting birthday cards in the mail (P18: 183-186).

In all instances when stepchildren expressed that they perceived the nonresidential parent’s family was exerting extra effort, I saw in this discourse that they also felt accommodated by the family’s behavior. No participants vocalized that they were turned off or felt smothered by their nonresidential side’s work to continue their inclusion in the family. Interpersonal control manifested within other behaviors, however, stepchildren saw as less positive. Exerting less effort in particular was discussed by participants as divergent behaviors the nonresidential side used in interactions.
**Exerting less effort.** The second behavior the nonresidential parent’s family utilized to perform the interpersonal control strategy was exerting less effort. In these instances, participants perceived that their nonresidential side failed to put forth enough, or any, energy to keep in touch with them after the divorce and/or remarriage(s). Stepchildren perceived this as the nonresidential parent’s family’s attempt to push the stepchild away, which I categorized as divergence. Ellen described that her previously strong relationship with her nonresidential parent’s side of the family changed when they refused to come to her high school graduation. She said:

…anyway I got a call that none of my dad’s family was going to make it. They had this and this and this to do and they had every excuse in the book. I mean, anything to, we can’t find somebody to babysit the dog, and I was, and this was my day, it’s the next best, the biggest thing before you get married. I was just livid. They came up with every excuse in the book, and finally I just had enough after the seventh call and it was [my aunt], my last call, and oh, this this and this has to happen, and I can’t come from Oklahoma. I said I have horse show friends coming, flying in from Texas, and I only see them once a summer and she goes, ‘you never wanted to be part of the family anyway.’ So that was kinda, and I told her, and I had had enough, and I said, very calmly said, you know, it was you guys that dismissed me from the family, I had no idea what was going on, how everybody is and whatnot, I was like the phone calls stopped. You have my number and I’ve attempted to call you numerous times and not a call back. And she went on about how I’d made it perfectly clear that I didn’t
want to be part of that family anymore and I said you know this is a
typical [dad’s] side of the family. You guys can’t do anything unless it
revolves around your individual selves. I said this is the last time you will
probably get to see me for, until I get married or graduate from college, or
whatever happens and you can’t make the effort to come up, and she goes,
‘well you were never part of our family anyway.’ (P25: 350-385)

Ellen’s family illustrated interpersonal control most clearly in their comments
about Ellen not belonging in the family as a response to why they were refusing to attend
her high school graduation. This statement highlights their attempt to control the
boundaries of the family, which clearly Ellen’s aunt did not consider her a part of, and
used interpersonal control to diverge from Ellen permanently. Jane’s discourse also
indicated she found the absence of her nonresidential parent’s family at an important
event evidence of their attempt to control the relationship and diverge from her,
particularly when they simultaneously required her to attend their weekly dinners. She
explained:

… At nine I started playing softball and I’m not bragging, but I was pretty
good at the game, and I’d always have games, and like none of my dad’s
family would come. None of them came. I mean, they got a schedule, so they
knew about it, but my mom and my grandma, and my grandma was still really
sketchy if she would come, but my mom was there every week, and so, but
my dad never came to one game, and my dad’s family never came to one
game, so I felt even more and more like not a part of the family. It was just
kind of like, I don’t know, like responsibility, like if I went to a dinner, it’d be
like I was responsible to do it because I was my dad’s child and I kind of had to go. I would say that [year] was pretty bad because I would say [feeling like family would] be like a 40, cause I was a pretty big, softball was pretty much my life and time, so them not being there, I was really hurt by it. (P17: 437-448)

Through not attending something that was important to Jane, but requiring her to attend something that was important to them, the nonresidential side illustrated to her that they were in control of the course of the relationship. A third and final accommodation strategy the nonresidential side used was interpretability, which I discuss next.

**Interpretability**

I discovered in a few of the participants’ discourses an illustration that their nonresidential side accommodated by using the interpretability strategy, in which the person accommodates to the other’s ability to understand. The nonresidential side did this by attempting to explain situations to the stepchild which they might not understand because of their age, or accounting for what was going on around them.

**Accounting.** Accounting involves the attempt to understand and explain experiences (Montgomery & Duck, 1991). Like storytelling, accounting possesses the narrative function of helping individuals make sense of their lives. Through accounting people can explain, or “account”, for events occurring around them and give meaning and purpose to them (Montgomery & Duck, 1991). In all instances of accounting, participants considered becoming closer, the motivation behind the nonresidential parent’s family’s use of the interpretability strategy, which I categorized as convergence. Nadia expressed
that her grandfather in particular helped her through several major changes in her life through explaining that she was not to blame. She described:

I remember this year we had a family Christmas out at my dad’s parents and my grandpa sat me down and talked to me and he like kind of fills in for our pastor sometimes, so he’s a religious figure, and kind of like talked to me about the divorce and brought out the Bible and helped me see it was going to be ok and stuff, so that was a big turning point for me, that he took the time to sit down and talk to me about it and ‘this isn’t your fault’ and told me stuff like that. So that really helped. (P19: 218-223)

Ike’s nonresidential family members were able to help him as well via interpretability by openly talking about the divorce and the effects it was having on him and his siblings. He remarked, “what we specifically talked about, we didn’t really talk about what happened, but we talked about what our parents could do to make it for the best of the children, and not necessarily for them[selves],” (P28: 256-258). The nonresidential parent’s family’s use of interpretability helped the stepchildren make sense of events in their lives, which the participants described as desired and accommodative.

**Summary of the Chapter**

In this chapter I addressed the last four research questions. The third and fourth research questions addressed the stepchild’s communication in interactions with the nonresidential parent’s family. They were, “How, if at all, do stepchildren accommodate their communication in interactions with their nonresidential parent’s family members over time?” and “What are stepchildren’s motivations for accommodating, or not, in interactions with their nonresidential parent’s family members over time?” The
participants’ descriptions of their communication illustrated that they used two accommodation strategies with the nonresidential side: (a) discourse management and (b) interpersonal control. I also grouped their discourse into four motivations behind their use of the strategies: (a) convergence, (b) maintenance, (c) divergence, and (d) complementing. I further examined how stepchildren in the present study perceived their nonresidential parent’s family’s communication by asking my fifth and sixth research questions, which were, “How, if at all, do stepchildren perceive their nonresidential parent’s family accommodating over time?” and “What are stepchildren’s perceptions of their nonresidential parent’s family’s motivations for accommodating, or not, over time?” I categorized the participants’ descriptions of their nonresidential parent’s family’s communication into three accommodation strategies: (a) discourse management, (b) interpersonal control, and (c) interpretability. Three motivations were behind the family’s use of these strategies: (a) convergence, (b) maintenance, and (c) divergence. I end with a brief discussion of the implications of these findings for future researchers as well as for stepchildren and their nonresidential parent’s family.

**Discussion of the Chapter**

Based on the results of this chapter, I will discuss the implications of the findings, how the findings in the current study differ from previous researchers’ findings, as well as what family members in the stepfamily context and researchers can take from the present chapter. First, I will discuss the implications of the results in regards to the discourse management accommodation strategy. Second, I will discuss implications for the study of the interpersonal control strategy. My focus on these two strategies in this section is due to the frequency I discovered the use of them within the participants’
experiences, as well as the strength of the implications I can draw from them for researchers and stepchildren and their nonresidential parent’s family members. I begin with an elaboration on discourse management implications.

**Discourse Management Implications**

Discourse management was the most frequent accommodation strategy that I identified in participants’ descriptions of both their own communication and in their perceptions of the nonresidential parent’s family’s communication. Scholars have claimed that discourse management is the broadest and most central category to Communication Accommodation Theory (Coupland, Coupland, & Henwood, 1988), which could be one reason why I was able to categorize much of the participants’ discourse into the discourse management strategy. It is important to note, however, that because of the data collection I used in the present study, discourse management may not have actually been the most frequent strategy in the participants’ actual interactions. Rather, it may be the easiest for the stepchildren to recall and discuss clearly because it was the easiest strategy to access through interview questions, such as “what topics did your family talk about?” and “is there anything you didn’t talk about with your family?”

As I conducted the interviews, it appeared more difficult for the participants to remember how the topics were discussed, which would have given more insight than is currently available in the present data as to how often and in what ways the stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family used the interpersonal control and interpretability strategies. Jones et al. (1999) argued that conversational analysis was an effective method to better record and understand individuals’ use of all the accommodation strategies because it allowed them to conceptualize the strategies separately as well as see how they
worked together to help the individual achieve their desired social distance from the other. The researchers also asserted that through conversational analysis they could better examine how the strategies manifested in both verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Their taped conversations between students and instructors in order to develop a coding system gave them a more complete understanding of how often the participants used the strategies as well as their motivations for doing so. I will discuss other methodological options in Chapter 5.

Within the category of discourse management, stepchildren frequently mentioned topic avoidance as a way they converged or maintained their relationship with the nonresidential family. Afifi & Keith (2004) argued that the lack of social prescriptions surrounding events such as divorce might drive individuals to avoid topics as a means of dealing with ambiguity in their now blurry boundaries with family members. In the pilot study for the dissertation, I found that topic avoidance was a strategy some stepchildren used to manage their uncertainty with the new stepfamily (DiVerniero, 2007). Comparing this to my findings for the present study, it is also a strategy stepchildren might use with the nonresidential parent’s family in order to converge or maintain the relationship. It makes sense that changing a topic to something non-stepfamily related is something stepchildren might do to fit in with the nonresidential family, fearing that the nonresidential parent’s family will be angry with the stepchild for acknowledging their “new” family or worried that discussing the stepfamily too much will give the nonresidential side permission to discuss their “real” opinions about the new stepfamily. However, interpersonal researchers have found that topic avoidance can have negative outcomes in relationships, even if the participants feel they are avoiding topics for the
better of the relationship (Dailey & Palomares, 2004; Dillow, Dunleavy, & Weber, 2009; Golish, 2000; Golish & Caughlin, 2002). Dillow et al. (2009) found that in romantic relationships, “individuals reported feeling less close to their partner if they decided to avoid certain topics due to a self-protection motivation, such as to save themselves from having to discuss a topic that might reflect poorly on them,” (p. 218). Furthermore, in family relationships, researchers found that high levels of topic avoidance about the relationship predicted low levels of satisfaction across all nuclear family relationships (Dailey & Palomares, 2004). Stepchildren’s use of topic avoidance with their nonresidential parent’s family may also hurt the relationship in the long run.

While being completely open at all times may not be a useful or realistic option for family members, stepchildren in the present student appeared to responded positively to the nonresidential family’s attempts to explicitly reach out and include the stepchild. Thus, it is likely the same would hold true if the nonresidential family told them that they were alright with the residential parent’s remarriage, if that was the case. This would allow the stepchild to feel more comfortable with their new family form, making them more open, as well as allow the nonresidential family to learn about the stepchild’s entire life, including their home life.

**Interpersonal Control Implications**

Some participants used the interpersonal control strategy in their communication with their nonresidential parent’s family, attempting to direct the course of the conversation and/or relationship, despite their young age. As I discussed earlier, regardless of the strategy they used, participants’ discourse regarding their motivations for accommodation with the nonresidential parent’s family was often complementing, or
altering their communication to illustrate respect for the status difference between themselves and their nonresidential family members. Since most of the participants were not even teenagers when their parents divorced and remarried, my read of these data is that they perceived that they had lower status than the older family members and that their opinions would be seen as less important and accepted because of their age. Because of this, they often would keep quiet if the nonresidential side did or said something against the residential stepfamily. While these actions would anger them, these stepchildren said they knew their place and refrained from speaking up because of their young age.

At the same time, there were several participants who expressed a breaking point in which they took charge and acted out or terminated communication, which I categorized as interpersonal control, motivated by divergence. Interpersonal control was a strategy they appeared willing to use if they felt the nonresidential family pushed them too far. As I discussed in Chapter Three, oftentimes this reaction would come about when the nonresidential family ganged up on the residential parent and/or stepparent. Thus, it does not have to be negativity directed toward the stepchild themselves for them to attempt to diverge from the group. Stepchildren’s use of the interpersonal control strategy might be further explained through the intergroup perspective. In interactions with others, individuals’ perceive multiple levels of categorization (Soliz, 2007; Soliz & Harwood, 2003, 2006). This means that family members do not just see each other in terms of the familial in- or out-group, but also as part of groups such as age, gender, and ethnicity. These perceptions of ingroup and outgroup will impact communication if and when they become salient for the communicators. When the nonresidential parent’s family said or
did negative things toward the residential family, the participants may have felt their age difference with the family members was more salient than their ingroup status with the stepfamily. However, when the comments or actions made the intragroup connection with the stepfamily more salient than the age difference, the stepchild would speak out and/or terminate communication with the nonresidential parent’s family. The nonresidential parent’s family should remember that the stepchild likely sees themselves as part of multiple groups. Just because the stepchild might feel close to the nonresidential side does not mean they will accept negativity toward their residential parent or stepparent. It is also clear that regardless of how respectful the stepchild might try to be, they can and do have a breaking point, which for four of the stepchildren, resulted in them terminating communication with the nonresidential side altogether. Not knowing when or where this breaking point might surface, it is important for the nonresidential side to keep their negative comments about the new stepfamily to themselves.

The participants’ own use of interpersonal control was often in response to interactions with the nonresidential parent’s family which made the stepchildren feel less like family with the nonresidential group. They were motivated by divergence, or increasing social distance with the nonresidential parent’s family. Some stepchildren though, perceived positive motivations behind their nonresidential side’s use of the same strategy when it manifested itself in “exerting extra effort.” Researchers often describe interpersonal control as the use of power to direct a conversation and/or relationship, thus bringing with it negative, divergent underpinnings (i.e., Harwood et al., 2003; Jones et al., 1999). And yet, interpersonal control can be positive when it allows people the
freedom to leave roles they formally held in the relationship (Giles & Coupland, 1991). For instance, the nonresidential parent’s family may have originally left scheduling time together up to the stepchild’s parents-of-origin, yet when the situation changed and this became more difficult or undesired by the parents-of-origin to do, such as after a divorce or parental death, the nonresidential parent’s family took control of the situation and went out of their way to continue including the stepchild. Since the participants were often too young to drive or make many decisions themselves after their parents’ divorce and remarriage, this act of taking charge allowed the stepchild to spend more time with the nonresidential family and maintain their relationships. The nonresidential parent’s side of the family should put forth this extra effort, but future studies might look at how the residential parent perceived the nonresidential side’s use of interpersonal control. As I discussed in Chapter Three, researchers have found that the type of relationship the two parents-of-origin have largely impacts how often and in what ways the children interact with the nonresidential parent (Blow & Daniel, 2002). Thus it makes sense that the quality of the relationship between the residential parent and the nonresidential side might also impact how willingly the residential parent responds to the nonresidential parent’s family’s use of interpersonal control. The residential parent may, like the stepchildren in the present study, also see it as positive and helpful, but they may also see it as stepping on toes, and as infringing the stepchild’s time with the new stepfamily. Further discussion of the strategies and their implications can be found next in Chapter Five.
Overview

In the warrant for the present study, I argued that the even though family may serve as the “most salient ingroup category in the lives of individuals,” (Lay et al., 1998, p. 434), these relationships can still be subjected to intergroup categorizations (Harwood et al., 2006), thus making the stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family relationship an appropriate one for researchers to examine. This relationship, though understudied, can still be one of importance both before and after a divorce and remarriage (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Soliz, 2008; Wilmot, 1995). My central purpose in the present study was to explore how stepchildren perceived the salience of intergroup distinctions between themselves and the nonresidential parent’s family, as well as how stepchildren communicated and managed these interactions over time. I also had five overarching goals, which stemmed from the central purpose. First, I sought to look beyond the immediate stepfamily household. Second, I aimed to discover how stepchildren perceived their familial boundaries, or shared family identity, with the nonresidential parent’s family. Third, I wanted to learn how, if at all, stepchildren accommodated, or alter, their communication with their nonresidential parent’s family during the transition into stepfamily life, and their motivations behind the accommodation. Fourth, I questioned how, if at all, stepchildren perceived that their nonresidential parents’ family accommodated their communication, and their perceptions of the nonresidential family’s motivations behind it. Fifth, I sought to determine how the stepchild and nonresidential
parent’s family’s use of strategies and their motivations changed, if at all, over time. I included a discussion of the results at the end of the Chapters Three and Four.

In this Conclusion chapter, I summarize the results for Chapter Three and Chapter Four. I then discuss implications for the study of intergroup communication, implications for Communication Accommodation Theory, and implications for practitioners. I end with a review of the strengths and limitations of the present study, as well as directions for future researchers.

**Overview of Chapter Three**

I devoted Chapter Three to discussing my findings for research questions one and two, in which I asked what turning points stepchildren reported in communication with their nonresidential parent’s family, as well as how they perceived family identification during each turning point. Based on my analysis of these data, in answer to research questions one and two, I discovered that stepchildren felt more or less like family in response to a variety of turning points. More specifically, I developed five categories of turning points that stepchildren said made them feel *more* like family with the nonresidential parent’s family and five categories of turning points that made them feel *less* like family with the nonresidential parent’s family. I then categorized the participants’ discourses into one of five trajectories to visually illustrate the stepchildren’s and nonresidential parent’s family relational development during the first 48 months the new stepfamily has formed.

Based on my analysis of the stepchildren’s discourse, I found that four factors emerged as particularly important in the participants’ levels of feeling like family. First, almost every participant mentioned the presence and absence of rituals as impacting their
feelings of connection to the nonresidential parent’s family, which complements earlier researchers’ findings on the power of ritual in the face of change (Baxter et al., 2009; Braithwaite et al., 1998). Second, stressful events often brought the stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family closer in cases when the participants perceived that the nonresidential parent’s family reached out to them. This supportive action allowed the stepchildren to manage the crisis (Greeff et al., 2006) as well as feel more included in the nonresidential side. Third, everyday talk was a major part of most of the participants’ turning points. The stepchildren’s descriptions of their day-to-day conversations with the nonresidential parent’s family as turning points supports the assertion that everyday talk can help build and maintain (family) identity, as well as shape family relationships (Schrodt et al., 2008). Fourth, explicit parental encouragement from the residential parent helped participants feel more secure in their relationships with all sides of the family, and quelled their guilt about spending time with the nonresidential parent’s family. Since the former spouses’ relationship is the primary predictor of the child’s contact with their nonresidential parent (Blow & Daniel, 2002), it would make sense that the residential parent also has an important role in the child’s continued relationship with the nonresidential parent’s family. Next, I review the findings and major discussion points from Chapter Four.

Overview of Chapter Four

In Chapter Four, I expanded on my analysis in response to the last four research questions. In these questions I asked about stepchildren’s accommodation and motivations in communication with their nonresidential parent’s family, as well as their perceptions of the nonresidential parent’s family’s accommodation and motivations. My
analysis of stepchildren’s discourse showed how the participants accommodated in their interactions with the nonresidential parent’s family and the motivations behind this accommodation. My analysis of stepchildren’s perceptions of their nonresidential parent’s family’s communication highlighted how the participants perceived their nonresidential parent’s family’s accommodated in interactions and the participants’ perceptions of the family’s motivations behind these strategies as well.

I discussed two major implications regarding the findings from Chapter Four. First, participants in the present study used the discourse management strategy the most often for accommodating their communication in interactions with the nonresidential parent’s family. I suggested that in order to further the study and understanding of this and other strategies, researchers should use a variety of qualitative methods, which I will expand on later in this final chapter. I also discussed how participants’ use of the discourse management study often manifested itself through the behavior of avoiding topics with the nonresidential parent’s family in an attempt to converge with the nonresidential family. Researchers warn though, that an excess of topic avoidance can lead to negative relational outcomes, and family members should foster an atmosphere of openness (Dailey & Palomares, 2004). A second implication surrounded the stepchildren’s discourse regarding their nonresidential parent’s family’s use of interpersonal control. Often described in negative terms (Jones et al., 1999), stepchildren perceived their nonresidential parent’s family’s use of interpersonal control as positive when it manifested itself in their behavior of exerting extra effort. In the next section, I expand upon general implications from the findings of the present study for research in intergroup communication.
Implications for the Study of Intergroup Communication

The assumptions of the intergroup approach was foundation for the design, execution, and analysis of the present dissertation (e.g., Harwood, 2005; Harwood et al., 2005; Harwood et al., 2006). Specifically, I used other intergroup researchers’ findings to help me frame my data in order to explore how, if at all, stepchildren saw group distinctions between themselves and their nonresidential parent’s side of the family, as well as how accommodation strategies might be connected to those perceived group distinctions (Banker & Gaertner, 1998; Soliz, 2007; Soliz & Harwood, 2003; 2006). Based on my findings, there are three main implications for the study of intergroup communication.

The first implication is that this present study helps further verify that familial relationships, particularly those with the extended family, are a valid context for study with the intergroup approach. The participants in the present study clearly made intergroup distinctions in their relationships with the nonresidential parent’s family and were able to describe changes in their communication with their family members based on the salience of those distinctions. Intergroup researchers examining extended family relationships have looked at in-law relationships (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009) and grandchild and grandparent relationships (Soliz & Harwood, 2006) finding that factors such as differences in age, ethnicity, religion, or political beliefs can result in intergroup distinctions. As a result of this, as a family becomes more diverse, such as the families discussed in the present study, the potential for intergroup distinctions, to see each other as different, increases. In fact, Messick and Mackie (1989) argued that the addition of new members into a group may instigate categorization, at least during the initial stages
of integration. It is not surprising then that, even despite the participants’ young ages when their parents’ divorced and remarried, they were still able to speak of memories of feeling more or less like family, or seeing themselves as more or less part of the nonresidential family group during the first 48 months of their stepfamily’s development. My findings support previous claims by Tajfel (1978) that humans learn early in life to begin making ingroup and outgroup distinctions and compare themselves to members of other groups, thus helping them learn who they are, and who they are not.

The second implication is that my use of the intergroup perspective in the present study helped further stepfamily research. These data extend researchers’ findings regarding intergroup distinctions in stepfamily and extended stepfamily relationships (Banker & Gaertner, 1998; Soliz, 2007). For example, Banker and Gaertner (1998) found that stepfamilies are more likely to categorize one another in terms of group membership than nuclear families. Soliz (2007) discovered that intergroup distinctions in stepfamilies are not restricted to the immediate household, but rather stepchildren may experience intergroup communication with their extended family and stepfamily as well. In the present study, I found that stepchildren’s descriptions of their levels of feeling like family with the nonresidential parent’s family highlighted the intergroup distinctions and communication with the nonresidential parent’s family during the first 48 months of their stepfamily’s development. Being able to understand how and why stepchildren categorize their nonresidential parent’s family has shed light on how the communication surrounding the stepchild’s transition into stepfamily life impacts their feelings of family with the nonresidential parent’s family.
The third implication for the study of intergroup communication is the utility of combining the intergroup perspective with a turning point analysis. Intergroup researchers have found that interactions and relationships are not static (Stephenson 1981). They can, and do, often move between intergroup communication, interpersonal communication, or become a combination of both (Stephenson, 1981). Similarly, in the present study I have also cited arguments from interpersonal communication scholars who say that relationships are not linear (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Baxter et al., 1999; Braithwaite et al., 2001). Rather, over the course of a relationship life cycle, roles and boundaries will change as individuals mature, situations change, new members are brought into the group, and others leave (Whitchurch & Dickson, 1999). It was important then to understand how family definitions, or feeling like family, changed over time. The combination of the intergroup approach and a turning points analysis allowed me to examine what events stepchildren said sparked intergroup distinctions with the nonresidential parent’s family, and why the salience of those distinctions raised or lowered for each turning point. Although there were several participants who described trajectories in which their level of feeling like family with the nonresidential side did not change over the first 48 months of their new stepfamily’s development (Elevated and Unchanging FLF and Deficient and Unchanging FLF), they were still able to describe what events made them continue to feel 100% like family or completely void of feeling like family. Thus, it was still communication, or a deafening absence of communication, with the nonresidential parent’s family that defined what, if any, intergroup distinctions were noted. This again illustrates that communication is constitutive, constructing our personal relationships, making them dynamic and ever-changing (Baxter, 2004).
The findings from the present study also further highlighted that utilizing a stage-based model to understand intergroup communication would have been ineffective. It was clear from the participants’ descriptions of their turning points that one sequence of events, which stage based models illustrate, would have not accurately highlighted the variety of pathways that the participants’ relationships with their nonresidential parent’s family took. Furthermore, many of the participants fell into one of the three more chaotic trajectories, discounting stage-based models linear development assumptions, as well as their long periods of stability and lack of times of change (Baxter et al., 1999). Rather, the findings of the present study complement Braithwaite et al.’s (2001) discovery that not all families or stepfamilies will follow the same trajectory in their developmental process, and makes turning points a suitable method to learn more about the impact intergroup distinctions had on the relationships in the context of the present study.

Closely tied to the study of intergroup is the intergroup theory, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which I also used in the present study to further examine the stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family’s relationship. I discuss implications for CAT next.

**Implications for Communication Accommodation Theory**

In Chapter One, I argued that given the context of study and use of the intergroup approach, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) would be appropriate to use to better understand the stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family relationship. I will discuss the implications of this decision in three parts: (a) the usefulness of CAT for studying communication in stepfamily and extended family relationships, (b) suggestions
for CAT, and (c) how the present study has added to CAT. First, I discuss how CAT was useful to the dissertation.

**Usefulness of CAT**

As I described above, the intergroup approach was helpful as I sought to discover and highlight how, if at all, stepchildren saw their family in terms of group membership, as well as what the family did or said to make those distinctions salient. CAT further allowed me to understand how and why stepchildren communicate in response to intergroup distinctions, as well as how and why they perceived their nonresidential parent’s family communicated during each interaction. The accommodation strategies served as convenient categories to explain what the participants described in their interviews. The interactions stepchildren described in their encounters with the nonresidential parent’s side, fit for the most part, easily into the accommodation strategy categories which allowed me to illustrate how stepchildren respond to feeling more or less like family, as well as how they perceived their family members responded as well. The theory’s focus on motivations behind the strategy allowed me develop questions that garnered rich descriptions concerning why the stepchildren utilized particular strategies, as well as why they thought their nonresidential parent’s family acted as they did.

Through the use of CAT I was able to show that, for this group of stepchildren who I spoke with, their use of accommodation strategies and the behaviors the strategies manifest within can and will change over time, even in the course of one conversation. As intergroup distinctions become more or less salient and motives change, stepchildren’s accommodation will as well, which parallels other researchers’ work with CAT within other interpersonal contexts (Giles, 2008). Therefore, while stepchildren may
rely on discourse management as a strategy with the nonresidential parent’s family through the behavior of topic avoidance, which can harm relational satisfaction over time (Dillow et al., 2009), they are not necessarily married to these strategies or behaviors. For instance, when stepchildren in the present study perceived their nonresidential parent’s family utilizing accommodation strategies which reduce intergroup distinctions, such as the use of interpersonal control to exert extra effort, they explained that they became more willing to open up, using strategies more conducive to building positive relationships. Thus, the nonresidential parent’s family should use accommodation strategies to reduce intergroup distinctions and promote a common family ingroup (Soliz, 2007), which can in turn promote harmony (Banker & Gaertner, 1998) and transcend negative perceptions of the other (Soliz, 2007).

In the end, the use of CAT made it possible to suggest specific applications to family members within this context, as I did in the discussion sections for Chapter Three and Chapter Four. It is my hope that these suggestions can be utilized to help these individuals better maintain positive relationships with one another. This theory was, overall, helpful in the study of this particular context. Next, however, I expand on some weaknesses I found as I used the theory to analyze my data.

Suggestions for CAT

As with all theories, CAT has some limitations. Therefore, I have two suggestions for amending the theory. First, in my attempt to analyze these data, I found myself at times confused as I tried to determine whether a participant’s description of their own or their family’s motivations behind accommodation was motivated by convergence or maintenance. According to intergroup researchers, to converge is to speak and/or act
more like the other, usually in an attempt to be accepted and liked by the group (Giles, 2008). Maintaining is keeping verbal and nonverbal communication the same, not attempting to gain or lessen social distance at all (Giles, 2008). Although the definitions are relatively distinct, it quickly became apparent that in the participants’ descriptions of their motivations, convergence and maintenance were very similar. For instance, in Chapter Four, I used a quote from Nadia to illustrate the discourse management strategy, yet it was quite difficult to determine if her motivation behind this strategy was to converge and be more like her nonresidential family, or to maintain things the way they were. To clarify, I’ll provide that exemplar here:

I would never say anything, just cause I didn’t want to get in the middle, like I would want to stick up for my mom, but I didn’t want to get in the middle of a thing, cause I knew maybe my mom’s side better, but I never would say anything. I’d kinda keep it to myself. (P19: 284-286)

Clearly, Nadia did not want to upset her family, but she also did not seem to be going out of her way to be more like them. Rather, she avoided the topic of her mother to continue having positive communication with her family as she did before the divorce. Therefore, I categorized this particular example as motivated by maintenance. The line between the two motivations, however, is exceptionally close, possibly even more so due to my use of qualitative methods in the present study. In past studies, researchers found that communicators may simultaneously converge on some of the other person’s features, such as inflection or pace, while diverging on other features, such as accent or mannerisms (Bilous & Krauss, 1988). I would argue then, that the same may be true for convergence and
maintenance. It is possible that stepchildren were motivated to maintain their overall relationship with the nonresidential parent’s family the way it was by means of converging to their verbal and nonverbal communication. Further exploration is needed to determine if this is the case.

A second suggestion for CAT is also tied to the strategies. I argued in Chapter Four that in order for researchers to successfully get at the participants’ use of all the strategies and more fully understand their communication, they should consider using a variety of qualitative methods in addition to interviewing. Part of this suggestion was due to participants being able to remember conversations with their nonresidential parent’s family relatively easily, but having little to no memory of the nonverbal communication that occurred during each turning point, with the exception of tone of voice. When scholars first developed CAT, they focused only on verbal communication, particularly code switching (Shepard et al., 2001), and entitled the theory “Speech Accommodation Theory.” The main thesis of the theory was that individuals use language to alter the social distance between themselves and others (Shepard et al., 2001). Years later, Coupland and Giles (1988) changed the name to “Communication Accommodation Theory” to reflect the theory’s new inclusion and recognition of the power of nonverbal communication as well. Therefore, it is likely that a lot of examples of nonverbal accommodation, particularly within the strategies of interpersonal control and interpretability, were lost in the interviewing process. Since nonverbal communication often functions outside of our awareness (Hackman & Johnson, 1991), this might mean that participants were not as aware of their own and the family’s nonverbal communication, or simply nonverbal behavior are was harder for them to recall and
describe. And yet, because the majority of our communication is nonverbal (Anderson, 1999), and nonverbal communication can be significantly more powerful than verbal messages alone (Argyle, Alkema, & Gilmour, 1971), it is important to understand the stepchild’s perceptions of their nonresidential parent’s family’s communication as a whole, which may be possible through the use of a variety of methodologies, which I discuss next.

For qualitative researchers, there are two additional methodological options to better understand the context of the present study. A first option would be ethnography. Ethnography would allow the researcher to study the patterns of stepchild and the nonresidential parent’s family’s verbal and nonverbal communication firsthand, which would help them gather rich data regarding the family members’ use of accommodation strategies (Fettermen, 2009). While it might be unrealistic for a researcher to follow the stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family around continually, perhaps for each participant, the researcher could attend one ritualized event the stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family celebrate together, such as a birthday celebration, to better understand the family’s communication. A second option would be to have participants keep interaction diaries. Researchers conducting a diary study would ask young adult or adult stepchild participants to write about the frequency and details of their interactions with the nonresidential parent’s family, as well as their feelings of family with the nonresidential side after each encounter. Asking participants to write in diaries over a period of time would keep them from having to recall the communication long after it occurred (Zimmerman & Weider, 1977; Thompson, 2008). In fact, stepfamily researchers have used diaries with good success (Braithwaite et al., 2003). This method would also
prevent the participants from feeling intruded on in their interactions with the
nonresidential parent’s family, as an ethnographic study has the potential to do, and
would allow for a more diverse and larger participant pool since researchers would not
have to spend as much time and money gathering data from the participants’ diaries as
they would if they had to shadow participants during interactions with the nonresidential
parent’s family (Duck, 1991). If researchers continue to employ a variety of methods to
understand the present context and CAT, they can fill in some of the gaps left by the
present study regarding the participants’ use of all the communication accommodation
strategies. I now complete my discussion of the theory with an elaboration of how the
present study has extended CAT.

**Potential Contributes to CAT**

While CAT has certainly assisted in the understanding of stepchildren and their
nonresidential parent’s family’s relationship, my findings in the present study have also
added to literature on CAT in two ways. First, by looking at the theory through an
interpretive lens, I was able to verify that even theories which are mostly
logical/empirical can be used for interpretive work successfully, if they are broad enough
to begin with (Afifi & Matsunaga, 2007; DiVerniero, 2007). Researchers using CAT
recognize that accommodation changes depending on the context of the interaction. In the
present study I was able to use the assumptions of the theory to get at rich, contextual
descriptions of the participants perceptions of accommodation in encounters with the
nonresidential family. This extends work previously done with the theory by giving more
insight into the reasoning behind these perceptions and motivations. While this is not to
say that interpretive methods are preferred or superior to logical/empirical methods, the
findings add to the current literature by adding a new, different viewpoint and allowed me to highlight the differences between communication behaviors and strategies (Jones et al., 1999), as well as argue for which may be more helpful in promoting positive interactions between the stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family.

Second, I discussed briefly in Chapter Four that researchers often describe interpersonal control in relatively negative terms, as the use of power to take over a conversation and/or relationship (Giles, 2008). In the present study, I was able to extend the literature to add a more positive example of interpersonal control. More often than not, exercising control over others may result in negative perceptions of them (Jones et al., 1999), yet participants who noticed their nonresidential parent’s family exerting extra effort considered this a positive, accommodative use of their status in the family. This extra effort helped stepchildren feel cared for and more included in the nonresidential parent’s family. Next, I expand on what implications practitioners can take from the findings of the present study.

Implications for Practitioners

In Chapter One, I argued that the results of the present study would serve to help not just researchers and family members of this particular context, but also family practitioners. I discussed the applications for family members in the discussions of the two results chapters and will focus on implications for practitioners here. There are two implications for practitioners who counsel families. First, the findings in Chapter Three and Chapter Four further highlight the importance and validity of viewing relationships as a system, and that relationships do not occur in isolation (Bochner & Eisenberg, 1987; Galvin, Dickson, & Marrow, 2003; Watzlawick et al., 1967). It is clear from the
exemplars throughout the findings chapters that the participants did not perceive their relationship with the nonresidential parent’s family as created in a vacuum, they were not completely separate and unrelated to their relationship with the residential stepfamily. Rather, the participants often noticed overlap and realized even at a young age that one relationship affected the others, making them interdependent. This supports the idea that systems, in this case family systems, are complex, interlocking sets of relationships in which if one part changes, it will cause a change in all parts (Walzlawick et al., 1967).

In the past, practitioners have used this framework to help them understand how family members influence one another and what effect their combined communication has on the individual in therapy (Parks, 2007). This allows them to understand their patients in context, as well as how individuals in their lives contribute to their beliefs, values, and self-concept (Galvin, Dickson, & Marrow, 2006). The same holds true for members of stepfamilies. Practitioners should inquire about the nature of the new, developing stepfamily relationships in order to better understand the stepchild, but the questions should not end there. The findings of the present study complement Braithwaite et al.’s (2003) argument that stepfamilies are not sequestered to one household, and other potentially influential individuals, such as the nonresidential family members, should be taken into account as having an impact on the stepchildren’s lives. It is clear that for stepchildren, feelings of split loyalties are not sequestered solely to the stepchild and (step)parents relationships (Afifi, 2003), but can easily bloom for the stepchild toward the nonresidential parent’s family after their parents’ divorce and their residential parent remarries. As many of the participants described, they may feel that liking their stepfamily, or even just spending time with the stepfamily, is a betrayal to their
nonresidential parent’s side of the family, and that the family members will see them as no longer belonging to the group. When the two sides of the family argue or speak negatively about one another in front of the stepchild, this was described as further fueling a sense of being torn between their established, longer relationships with their nonresidential parent’s family and their newer relationships with their residential stepfamily, and one that occasionally the stepchildren felt they had to choose sides for. Therefore it is important for practitioners to take these relationships into consideration when counseling a stepchild, particularly one in a new stepfamily, as they attempt to negotiate the new, changing boundaries of their family relationships.

A second suggestion for practitioners is tied to the development of relationships. As I have argued at different points the present manuscripts, relationships are not linear, and will likely have ups and downs over the course of the relational life cycle (Whitchurch & Dickson, 1999). Baxter et al. (1999) were able to illustrate this in their study on stepfamily relationships over the course of the first 48 months of development. They illustrated that not only will stepfamily relationships involve fluctuating feelings of family between the stepfamily members, but even after the members might have felt connected to one another, a negatively perceived turning point could occur that made their familial boundaries change once again. Even more importantly, they discovered that the feelings of fluctuation was not the same for every stepfamily. Instead, they argued that there are multiple trajectories for how stepfamilies might develop over their first 48 months. This was also the case for the stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family relationship. Not only were there continuing boundary changes, but not all stepchildren saw their familial feelings fluctuate the same way. There were five distinct trajectories of
relational development which illustrated how the stepchild felt their relationships with the nonresidential parent’s family continued to develop over the first 48 months of their new stepfamily. Thus, practitioners should not assume that all stepchildren’s interactions with their nonresidential parent’s family will follow the same course. The trajectories described in the present study can be utilized to understand the relationship during the stepchild’s new stepfamily, but many of the participants’ descriptions of their relationships after the first 48 months would likely have moved them to a different trajectory, so these only represent the first 48 months.

**Strengths of the Dissertation Research**

There were two main strengths of the present study, both of which I have already touched on briefly in this chapter. First, in the dissertation, I examined intergroup communication and CAT from a variety of new ways, including turning point analysis and qualitative methods. The use of turning points allowed me to highlight the instances in which intergroup distinctions became salient and then, through interviewing the participants, gather rich data concerning what the nonresidential parent’s side of the family said and/or did to spark this distinction for the stepchild. Communication Accommodation Theory, a largely logical/empirical theory used to make predictions (Afifi & Matsunaga, 2007), I used as a sensitizing theory in the present study, assisting by alerting me to specific concepts to look for in the stepchildren’s descriptions of their communication with the nonresidential parent’s family. Although CAT is a logical/empirical theory, researchers using it also acknowledge that accommodation strategies are “highly contingent upon the situational context in which the interaction occurs,” (Shepard et al., 2001, p. 37), as an interpretive researcher would assume. With
the help of this theory, as well as through the interviewing process, I was able to discover what strategies the stepchildren used to accommodate their nonresidential family as well as evoke rich description of their motivations behind the strategies. The same was true for their discussion of their perceptions of what the nonresidential parent’s family used to accommodate and their motivations behind their accommodation. Although there were a few stumbling blocks in this attempt to use a logical/empirical theory for an interpretive study, as I described earlier, the result was a new and successful use of CAT to inform my research questions, interview guide, and data analysis.

A second strength of the present study is that it extended the current research on stepfamily and extended family relationships, complementing scholars’ work on the importance of examining the extended family (e.g., Bryant et al., 2001; Johnson, 1985; Kornhaber, 1985; Milardo, 2005; Soliz, 2007; 2008). Although extended family may not be as much of a presence in children’s lives as their parents and stepparent(s), it is clear from the findings in the present study that the nonresidential parent’s family is an important and influential group, and their presence or absence in the stepchild’s life, as well as their acceptance or rejection of the new stepfamily, are important turning points in the stepfamily’s development, as past researchers have argued (Baxter et al., 1999). Thus, much like the development of a new stepfamily may alter the stepchild’s relationship with the nonresidential side by keeping them from interacting as often or moving them away, the stepchild’s relationship with the nonresidential side also appears to impact their relationship with the new stepfamily. Some participants discussed looking to their new stepparent and/or extended stepfamily to fill gaps that they felt in their extended family because of a poor relationship with the nonresidential side. Others spoke
of their nonresidential parent’s side’s dislike for their new stepparent fueling their own dislike for their stepparent, yet some contended that it created a feeling of split loyalty in which they chose to stay loyal to their new stepfamily. The interdependence between the two family groups is clear, further illustrating the importance of recognizing families as a system in order to better understand their communication (Bochner & Eisenberg, 1987; Watzlawick et al., 1967).

**Limitations of the Dissertation Research**

There are also two main limitations in the present study. First, although I used the snowball method (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) to find participants, even posting my research call on networking sites such as Facebook to attract a variety of respondents, the vast majority of my participants were white and from the Midwest, making it an overall non-diverse sample in terms of race and geography. While this is unfortunate, it was clear from the interview data that the experiences participants had with their nonresidential parent’s family varied. In the end, I was able to reach saturation and combine the data into themes and trajectories that represented the stories they told, but by no means were the experiences they described homogenous. It will be important for future researchers to address this limitation in order to adequately represent the large variety of stepfamily types (Ganong & Coleman, 1994).

A second limitation is that I only asked the participants to fill out turning point graphs for the first 48 months of their stepfamily’s development. My focus on the first 48 months of the stepfamily’s development, which is consistent with what Baxter et al. (1999) used in their study of stepfamily turning points, was because researchers found that stepfamilies “make or break” by the fourth year (Papernow, 1993). Furthermore, I
wanted to examine a time period in the stepchild’s life that would have a high likelihood of change, which the transition into stepfamily life often does (Baxter et al., 1999). The limitation then is that many of the participants expressed that their relationship with the nonresidential parent’s family was far different before and/or after the time period I focused on. It is important to remember that these findings apply only to the first four-year span of the stepfamily relationship.

**Directions for Future Research**

Based on the findings from the present study, there are five directions for future researchers to continue on with to better understand the stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family relationship. First, as I have already briefly mentioned, since in the current study I only examined the four years in which the stepfamily began to develop, and many participants described that their relationship changed afterwards, it is important for future researchers to examine the stepchild’s relationship with the nonresidential parent’s family once the stepfamily is established, or older than four years (Golish, 2003). Also, several of the participants in the present study said that their stepfamilies dissolved after the first four years. Lambert (2007) has examined the communication and management of former stepfamily members as they negotiate what they are to one another after their family status dissolves, finding it a complicated and ambiguous process. It will be important to focus on how the stepchild’s relationship with the nonresidential parent’s family is maintained while their stepfamily relationships are dissolving, in particular to see whether the dissolution of the stepfamily has any impact on the intergroup distinctions in the stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family relationship.
Second, while I discussed the salience of rituals in the present study, a separate study in which the researcher focuses exclusively on the role rituals play in the development and maintenance of the stepchild and nonresidential side would help us better understand interaction in this relationship. It appears from the participants in the present study that rituals, though important to their relationship with the nonresidential side, are far more complex than just needing to be around for stepchildren to attend. For the participants I spoke with, these rituals represented not just a way to spend time with their nonresidential side, which likely happens less as the stepfamily develops, but also as a way for the nonresidential side to show them that they will not be treated any differently even though they now have a new group of family members to form relationships with. I intend to continue exploring this.

Third, the role of the parent(s) was an issue that came up occasionally in the interviews. For instance, the presence of the nonresidential parent was often mentioned by participants as something that played into how often they saw their nonresidential side of the family. Researchers have found that how often the children of divorce see their extended family is often related to how frequently they see their nonresidential parent (Doka & Mertz, 1988). While some stepchildren expressed that even if their nonresidential parent was never in the picture, they still had some ties to their nonresidential side, most explained that the relationships were not as strong as when their nonresidential parent was around. The role of the residential parent appears important as well (Blow & Daniel, 2002). Participants spoke about their residential parent’s encouragement as allowing them to quell feelings of guilt they might have in splitting their time between the families, though many of the participants described that they felt
their residential parent’s encouragement came in the form of not badmouthing the nonresidential side and/or allowing them to visit the nonresidential side. Only one participant mentioned their stepparent as someone who encouraged their relationship with the nonresidential side. The rest of the participants explained that the stepparent either implicitly discouraged it through means such as not allowing the family to call the stepchild at home or, more often, they never had any opinion that they knew of at all, perhaps not feeling it was their place at the start of the stepfamily’s development. A further look into how the encouragement, as well as what form of encouragement, plays a role in the stepchild’s relationship with the nonresidential side would be beneficial in learning more about the overall family.

A fourth direction for future researchers would be a closer look at the factors surrounding the divorce the parents-of-origin went through, such as the level of amicability, and how, if at all, that contributed to the relationship that the stepchild and nonresidential parent’s family developed and maintained. In the present study I asked all the participants whether their parents’ divorce was amicable or not, and in the majority of cases, the participants with poor relationships with the nonresidential family said their parents’ divorce was riddled with conflict, whereas those who continued to have positive relationships with the nonresidential side mostly described that their parents’ divorce was amicable. Because my methods were interpretive, I cannot make claims about these correlations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), particularly with such a small sample, thus future researchers should examine whether there is a correlation between the two variables, and how stepchildren and nonresidential sides who have been through a rough divorce are able to still continue on with a positive relationship.
A final suggestion for future research is for scholars to consider the stepchild’s relational development with the new stepfamily. It is clear from the present study that the extended stepfamily plays a role in the development of the stepfamily and vice versa. In the pilot study for the dissertation, I found that the new extended stepfamily was also a source of uncertainty for the participants, who said that they were often pushed by their residential parent to “make the right impression,” and felt pressured to quickly accept these strangers as family right away (DiVerniero, 2007). Therefore, looking at the development of both the new stepfamily and the new extended stepfamily would be helpful in understanding the interdependence of these relationships as well.

My goal with the present study was to better understand how and why family members categorize one another in terms of ingroups and outgroups and accommodate their communication as a result of these distinctions. I found that in the context of stepchildren and their nonresidential parent’s family, family members must negotiate new boundaries and roles as the stepchild transitions into stepfamily life. My hope is that my findings in the present study will lead to an increased awareness and understanding which ultimately helps communication researchers make better sense of intergroup communication in interpersonal relationships. In the particular context of stepchildren and nonresidential parent’s family members, my goal is to help family members understand the perceived motivations behind their communication, which should assist them in utilizing strategies which will ameliorate intergroup distinctions and promote familial harmony.
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APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

I am from the Communication Studies Department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and will be interviewing you today. I am working on a research project that focuses on stepchildren’s communication with their stepfamily and extended family members. To participate in the interview, you must be at least 19 years of age and currently be a stepchild in a stepfamily that formed at least four years ago. Also, you must have had a relationship you remember with your nonresidential parent’s family before your parents’ divorce so we can compare it to your current communication with them. Does this describe you?

First, I want to take you through the informed consent form and procedures for the study so that you clearly understand your rights today. Let’s do that first.

Ok, first I would like to know a little bit about you.

Occupation: _____________
Age: ____________

What year would you say your family became a stepfamily? ____________
What happened at that time that would make you think about yourselves as a family?

I will ask you some questions about your relationship and communication with members of your nonresidential parent’s family. Even if your parents had joint custody, this is the parent you lived with the least amount of time. Is this your mom or your dad? ____

Remember that there are no right or wrong answers to any of these questions. I want to understand your experiences, so feel free to add as many details and stories as you feel comfortable with to fully describe your thoughts. (*If at any
point the participant’s discomfort, if there is any, appears problematic, the interview should be discontinued*).

1) Tell me the story of your parent’s divorce.

2) Tell me the story of your (Mom/Dad’s) remarriage.

3) Now I would like to learn about your relationship with your nonresidential parent’s family. This can be anyone outside your household on your nonresidential parent’s side such as grandparents, aunts, cousins, and so on.
   a) Tell me who we are talking about—who do you include as your Mom’s/Dad’s family?
   b) How close were you with your Mom’s/Dad’s family at the time of the divorce? Before the remarriage? Today?
   c) How was your relationship with your Mom’s/Dad’s family similar or different to your relationship with your residential parent’s (Mom/Dad’s) family before the divorce? Before the remarriage? Today?

In order to understand the relationship with your Mom’s/Dad’s family, I want to talk with you about this family over a period of time. We will start with when your stepfamily began and will talk about the first 48 months, or four years, of your new stepfamily.

I am going to be asking you to talk about the different turning points in your relationship with your Mom’s/Dad’s family during the first 48 months of your stepfamily’s development. A turning point is a single event or episode that defines and/or changes your relationship with someone. I am interested in both events which positively transformed your relationship with your Mom’s/Dad’s family in some way, as well as those which may have been points of challenge of difficulty. Thus a turning point is a critical event after which your relationship with your Mom/Dad’s family changes either positively or negatively. Do you have any questions about what a turning point?

4) As we look at the graph, that means that the bottom of the graph, or the x-axis, is time in months over four years. The left side of the graph, or the y-axis, asks you to rate how much or little you “felt like a family” with your Mom’s/Dad’s family members at each of these different turning points. Zero is not at all, and 100 is completely felt like a family.
a. Before we begin with the graph, I would like to know how you would rate your relationship with your Mom’s/Dad’s side of the family before your parents divorced.

b. How would you rate your relationship with your Mom’s/Dad’s side of the family before the remarriage?

c. How would you rate your feelings of family with your Mom’s/Dad’s family today?

d. What does 100% “feeling like a family” mean to you?

You said above that your stepfamily began in _____. What month would you like to start the graph (when did your stepfamily development begin)? ________________

Please tell me when the first turning point in your relationship with your Mom’s/Dad’s family occurred during your stepfamily’s first 48 months of development. (Keep asking until they’ve listed all).

After each turning point is plotted:

   a. Tell me the story of this turning point. What happened?
   b. Who was there?
   c. What was the occasion?
   d. Where did the event take place?
   e. What did you talk about?
   f. What was not talked about? Probe: why
   g. How and why did this event make you feel more/less like a family with your Mom’s/Dad’s family?
   h. What did your Mom’s/Dad’s family do or say to make you feel more/less like a family?
   i. Why do you think they said/did this?
   j. What did you do or say in response?
   k. Why did you do/say what you did?
   l. Who, if anyone, did you talk to about this event that happened?
   m. What did this person(s) do or say?

Now I would like you to connect all the turning points on the graph, so we can see the progression of the relationship. I would like to ask you some questions about your relationship with this side of the family overall.

5) As you look at this graph, this picture of the relationship you have with your Mom/Dad’s family, how would you describe this relationship and how you feel like a family with them?
6) How would you describe the trajectory of your relationship with your Mom/Dad’s family, looking at the graph?

7) If you were writing a book about this developmental process, based on your family, what would the title of the book be called?

8) What did you call this side of the family before the stepfamily formed? After it?

9) How often and in what ways did you communicate with your Mom’s/Dad’s family before the divorce?

10) How often and in what ways did you communicate with your Mom’s/Dad’s family after the divorce?

11) How, if at all, did your communication with your Mom’s/Dad’s family change when the stepfamily formed?

12) How often and in what ways do you communicate with your Mom’s/Dad’s family today?

13) What challenges were there, if any, in keeping or maintaining your relationship with your Mom’s/Dad’s family after the divorce?
   
   Probe: What did you do or say to handle any challenges you have had with keeping or maintaining these relationships?

   Probe: Keep probing until they have exhausted the list.
   
   Probe: Give me an example of how you handled a challenge

14) Describe the contact, if any, your residential parent has with your Mom/Dad’s family since the divorce.

15) Describe the contact, if any, the members of your stepfamily with your Mom/Dad’s family since the divorce.

16) How comfortable are your stepfamily members about your relationship with your Mom’s/Dad’s side of the family? Probe: what do they do or say about this relationship?

17) What else should I know about your communication with your stepfamily or extended family members?

Thank you so much for agreeing to be a participant for this study!
Stepchildren's Communication with the Nonresidential Parent's Family

Feeling Like a Family

Months