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Stepchildren's Communicative and Emotional Journey from Divorce to Remarriage: Predictors of Stepfamily Satisfaction

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Abstract

This study explores the emotional and communicative profiles of young adults who have experienced a parental divorce and the emergence of a stepfamily to better understand influences on stepfamily satisfaction. Results of regression analyses indicate that strong negative emotions experienced at the time of the divorce are a negative predictor of current stepfamily satisfaction, even after controlling for age at the time of the divorce. In addition, level of open self-disclosure to a stepparent, although not parents, is a positive predictor of current stepfamily satisfaction. Finally, the extent to which the father has now fully explained the circumstances of the divorce is a positive predictor of current stepfamily satisfaction, whereas the extent to which mother has now fully explained the circumstances of the divorce is a negative predictor of current stepfamily satisfaction. These findings are discussed and future directions for research on stepfamily interaction and satisfaction are offered.

Keywords: divorce; emotion, expression, self-disclosure, stepchildren, stepfamilies, stepparents

Scholars have come to see parental separation, divorce, new family cohabitation, and remarriage as a process of critical events, each with its own set of challenges and opportunities (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Booth, 1999; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Although the experience of divorce and creation of stepfamilies are significant and profound for all family members, scholars have done relatively little systematic analysis of the emotional experiences during divorce and their potential influence on remarriage, especially from the perspective of children in these families (Metts et al., 2013). Children who have experienced parental divorce and become part of stepfamilies are especially challenged to traverse the old and new families (Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007; Speer & Trees, 2007), interact with their parents and other adults involved across different households (Braithwaite, McBride &

Schrodt, 2003), and navigate a range of emotions and decisions about whether to express their feelings and to whom (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Metts et al., 2013; Wilkes & Fromme, 2002). In the best of circumstances, the successful outcome of this difficult journey is the pleasure of feeling part of the newly created family and experiencing the satisfaction of close ties, support, and acceptance. Our goal in this investigation is to explore the potential contributions of two important factors associated with current stepfamily satisfaction: emotional responses to parental divorce and the communication profiles of young adults who have become members of a stepfamily.

Children's emotional responses during and after parental divorce are complicated, but often overwhelmingly negative. Like other family members, children might experience strong negative emotions such as "fear, sadness, and anger" when the stability, security, and affection of family ties are disrupted through a divorce (Ganong & Coleman, 2004, p. 42). Metts and colleagues (2013) found that negative emotions far outnumbered positive emotions during the divorce stage. The researchers coded 14 negative emotions and affective states, dominated by angry/hostile/bitter, resentment, upset/stressed/worried, hurt/abandoned/betrayed, and dislike. Negative emotions accounted for 72% of the emotions experienced by children during this stage. In particular, strong outwardly directed emotions of anger, feeling betrayed, and bitterness accounted for 15% of all the emotions expressed during this time. Of course, emotions are flexible and multifaceted. Over time, children might come to appreciate the positive consequences of the divorce. For example, Demo and Fine (2010) noted that many children come to see parental divorce as "a transition in family relationships whereby daily tensions, bickering, and hostility between parents subside, creating hope for a happier family environment" (p. 125). Given the strong and compelling role of emotions in response to the divorce of parents and their subsequent emergence as stepfamilies are formed and are enacted, it is important to understand both the experience of emotions and their expression among children and stepchildren (Metts et al., 2013).

The experience and expression of emotion permeates the experience of parental divorce as one of ambiguous loss (Afifi & Keith, 2004) and navigating the challenges of becoming a stepfamily (Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2010). Metts et al. (2013) argued that although "the divorce decree legally dissolves the role relationship of husband and wife, it cannot dissolve the affective links that the ex-spouses/co-parents and children associate with their relationship and roles" (p. 416). The different experience of divorce, its aftermath, and the formation of stepfamilies present challenges to all stepfamily members, children especially, as they experience challenges in navigating changing roles and expectations (Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2013; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Speer & Trees, 2007), loyalty conflicts when they feel caught between their parents (Afifi, 2003; Afifi

& Schrodtt, 2003) and members of their extended family (DiVerniero, 2013). As one stepchild explained, "I always use the metaphor of the bone between two dogs ... if it happened they [parents] were forced to talk to one another it was not pretty at all ... I did not feel much like a person, I felt like a plaything" (Braithwaite et al., 2008, p. 41). Similarly, becoming a stepfamily necessitates forming a new set of relationships with stepparents and stepsiblings, negotiating roles and expectations that are in flux and often unclear for all members of the new family, and children in particular (Schrodtt & Braithwaite, 2014). Although becoming a stepfamily is often fraught with challenges, scholars have also explored how stepfamily members interact in ways that facilitate resiliency and positive stepfamily experiences (e.g., Afifi, 2008; Afifi & Keith, 2004). Wilkes and Fromme (2002) studied a small sample of stepfamilies formed after divorce and four years later found that although negative emotions persisted, they reduced in intensity over time.

Our interest in this study is on emotions experienced by children at the time of their parents' divorce and their role in current stepfamily satisfaction. Turnbull and Turnbull (1983) advocated for the study of emotions of stepchildren, arguing that the challenges of understanding and managing children's strong emotions and emotional ambivalence are important. They advised stepparents to "expect ambivalence," warning that "children appear on successive days or successive hours to show both emotions of strong love and strong hate toward them" (p. 227). Metts et al. (2013) analyzed in-depth interviews with young adult stepchildren as they looked back and described their experiences and choices regarding expression of emotions across critical events in parental divorce, the remarriage, and the formation of the stepfamily, as well as critical events that brought stepchildren to regard the stepfamily as more or less a family. They developed a profile of emotions experienced and expressed by these stepchildren, and they chronicled the strong negative emotions experienced at different stages, for example anger and hurt, as well as less negative emotions, such as sadness and apprehension linked to emotional ambivalence. They also chronicled positive emotions that stepchildren experienced at the different stages (e.g., feeling happy or accepted), and pointed out the need to attend to these emotions as well. Metts et al. (2013) also focused on stepchildren's emotional expression, which was at times direct and other times indirect, and they discussed stepchildren's experiences and decisions regarding emotional expression. They found that children often chose not to express their emotions, in particular negative emotions, which might function to keep the peace but incur costs to stepchildren's well-being and relationships with parents and stepparents. Metts et al. (2013) suggested the next step was to develop a scale to measure and test hypotheses about the experience and expression of stepchildren's emotions, a task we undertook in this study.

In sum, the emotional experiences for children that emerge during parents' divorce are strong and often negative. Although some research suggests that they might lessen in intensity over time and are not associated with psychological adjustment in the years that follow (Kelly & Emery, 2003), other research indicates that parental divorce and becoming a stepfamily could influence children well into their adult lives (Booth, 1999). As Kelly and Emery (2003) concluded, "Divorce can create lingering feelings of sadness, longing, worry, and regret. Feelings of loss persisted a decade after the divorce" (p. 359). To clarify the effect of emotions experienced at the time of parental divorce, it is necessary to focus attention on the development of the stepfamilies as the context that is most likely to make these emotions salient and directly or indirectly influence feelings of satisfaction associated with the reconfigured family. We speculated that for those young adults who experienced strong negative emotions during their parents' divorce, the lingering negative affect will constrain the ability or willingness to invest emotionally in a new family—an investment that is most likely to induce feelings of satisfaction. In much the same way that sadness experienced at the time of a loss is an emotion that passes relatively quickly, the affective state of grief over loss of the original family can linger for a long time. Although children experience a variety of emotions during the transitional phases from family of origin into the stepfamily, a transition that might evolve over several years, those emotions experienced during the divorce stage have the potential to have lasting effects. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H1: Negative emotions experienced at the time of the divorce will be a negative predictor of current stepfamily satisfaction.

In addition to testing the potential lingering effects of negative emotions, our second goal was to explore important communication factors and their influence on current stepfamily satisfaction. Scholars have studied a variety of communication factors associated with openness and nonexpression in stepfamilies (e.g., Braithwaite et al., 2008; Golish, 2000). They have found that, among other factors, strong and satisfying stepfamilies engaged in increased openness and everyday talk (Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2013; Schrodt et al., 2007; Schrodt, Soliz, & Braithwaite, 2008). However, scholars have also demonstrated that prescriptions of openness are short-sighted, as stepfamily members, particularly children, complicate desires for openness with desires for nonexpression, often simultaneously (e.g., Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004). From the perspective of children, although at times they rejected parental openness, especially when they found themselves caught in the middle as a result of that openness, children expressed a desire for parents to share relevant and appropriate information with them (Braithwaite et al., 2008).

In particular, children desire to understand the issues surrounding their parents' separation and divorce. Kelly and Emery (2003) stressed the importance

of children receiving adequate information on the reasons for parental separation and divorce. Unfortunately, Dunn, Davis, O'Connor, and Sturgess (2001) found that most children received no information (23%) or just one- or two-sentence explanations (45%). Only 5% of children believed they had received adequate information and encouragement to ask questions. The lack of open communication about the reasons for the divorce is unfortunate. Children of all ages need some degree of explanation to understand why the family structure they had known will no longer exist. The long established role of sense making proposed and elaborated by Weick (1979, 1995) underscores this need. As Weick noted, making sense of one's circumstances emerges from and informs basic identity. It is also a social activity where stories told teach and shape the "reality" of past and current events. Perhaps most important, sense making is an ongoing process. When a family dissolves, children seek to understand who they are if no longer just mom and dad's son or daughter in a traditional home, to assure themselves that they are not to blame, to hear the story of why mom and dad divorced, and to anticipate who they will be in the future. Needless to say, entering a new family structure where another person enacts the role of mom or dad and new siblings join the family can be even more challenging for the sense-making process. Communication within this context functions most effectively when it reduces ambivalence and uncertainty regarding expectations and behaviors that distinguish the new family from the previous one. Although many of these behaviors and expectations are embedded within everyday interactions, schedules, and events, others carry more abstract, relational and role implications, such as a stepparent's role as friend or disciplinarian, a stepsibling's role as friend or adversary, and the clarification of privacy boundaries between stepfamily life and the nonresidential parent.

In sum, the challenges of understanding parental divorce, accepting its necessity, and responding positively to the reconfiguration of a new family suggests that the most effective communication will include an explanation for the divorce, not only suitable for the child's age at the time of the divorce, but also later in life when the explanation can be enriched with details appropriate to young adulthood. In addition, the perceptions that both parents and stepparents will serve as a source for open expression of emotions and for self-disclosure of issues that arise during the ongoing process of growing up and coping with the transition into adulthood are essential elements in the facilitation of a satisfying stepfamily experience. To test this assumption, we advanced the following hypothesis:

H2: Communication factors at the time of the divorce and at present will contribute significant variance to current stepfamily satisfaction beyond that contributed by negative emotions.

Method

Procedures

Following approval from the University Office of Research Ethics and Compliance, an online survey was submitted to the departmental research pool at a Midwestern university. The site included a variety of surveys available to students to complete for extra credit. Instructions that accompanied access to the link for the survey specified that to complete the survey, respondents were required to be at least 18 years old and a member of a stepfamily with which they resided at least part of the time. When the survey was accessed, respondents were asked to read the informed consent page describing the content of the survey and their rights as a participant. Those who agreed clicked "Continue" and were presented with the survey.

Participants

The initial sample consisted of 179 undergraduate students from a medium-sized Midwestern university. After removing responses from those who were younger than 5 years old at the time of the divorce (e.g., "I was an infant") and those who resided with the parent who had remained single, the final sample included 152 young adults with a mean age of 21.04 years ($SD = 3.95$). Females constituted 66% of the sample ($n = 100$), males constituted 34% of the sample ($n = 51$), and 1 respondent did not report his or her sex. The average age at the time of the divorce was 10.88 years ($SD = 4.16$) and the average age at the time the target stepfamily was formed was 14.33 years ($SD = 4.32$). The primary residence after the divorce was predominantly with the mother (64%), although 20% of the sample reported they lived with both parents equally, and 11% lived only with their father.

Measures

The survey contained two sections. The first section focused on the parents' divorce, the respondent's affective reactions during this time, and the extent to which parents communicated information about the divorce to the respondent. In this section, respondents first provided their age at the time of the divorce. They then responded to a list of positive and negative emotions that had been generated from the Metts et al. (2013) study, indicating the extent to which they experienced each emotion at the time of the divorce on a scale of 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*intense*). The positive emotions included happy, excited, liking, love, hopeful, comfortable, content, and relieved. These items were combined into a single variable labeled positive emotions ($\alpha = .89$). The negative emotions included dislike, angry, hate, resentment, apprehensive/afraid, confused, upset/stressed/

worried, sad, disappointed, hurt/betrayed, embarrassed, guilty, disgusted, and jealousy/ envy. These items were combined into a single variable labeled negative emotions ($\alpha = .92$). The final question in the divorce section included two items that assessed the extent to which the participant's mother and father provided an explanation for the divorce as appropriate for the participant's age at that time on a scale of 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*fully*).

The second section of the survey focused on the stepfamily that was formed after the divorce, patterns of self-disclosure, and satisfaction with the stepfamily. Respondents were first asked to select the stepfamily where they spent most of their time (if both parents had remarried) and to use that stepfamily as the target when responding to subsequent questions. Respondents were also asked their age at the time the target stepfamily was formed. Respondents were then asked to indicate the extent to which their mother and father had now fully explained the circumstances or reasons for the divorce to their satisfaction. Scale responses ranged from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*completely*). The next questions shifted the direction of communication from parent to child to child to parent by asking respondents the extent to which they disclosed personal information to each of the following family members: mother, father, and stepparent. Scale responses ranged from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*fully*). The final scale in this section assessed current stepfamily satisfaction using an adapted version of Huston, McHale, and Crouter's (1986) Marital Opinion Questionnaire (MOQ). The original, 11-item scale was altered to reflect the stepfamily as the referent instead of a marital partner or specific family member. Participants were instructed to think about their relationships with their "stepfamily as a whole" and to report their feelings toward their stepfamily over the last month. Responses to 10 of the items used seven-point semantic differential scales (e.g., *miserable-enjoyable*, *empty-full*), and an additional item assessed global satisfaction using responses that ranged from 1 (*completely dissatisfied*) to 7 (*completely satisfied*). Previous researchers have demonstrated the validity and reliability of using a modified version of the MOQ to measure family satisfaction (e.g., Schrodtt & Afifi, 2007), and in this study, the instrument produced strong internal reliability ($\alpha = .96$). The survey closed with demographic questions including sex and current age.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Before running the regression analyses, a preliminary assessment of three demographic variables was conducted to determine whether their association with current stepfamily satisfaction warranted their inclusion as control variables in the regression models. Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations among all interval-level variables. As indicated, the respondent's

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Pearson's Product-Moment Correlations Among All Variables.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Divorce Factors													
1 Age at divorce	10.88	4.16											
2 Pos. emotion	1.17	.83	-.02										
3 Neg. emotion	1.75	.85	-.02	-.44**									
4 Mother exp. div.	2.16	1.24	.34**	.13	-.05								
5 Father exp. div.	1.64	1.44	.28**	-.07	.14	.34**							
Stepfamily Factors													
6 Age SF formed	14.33	4.37	.74**	.11	-.08	.31**	.21**						
7 Mother now exp. div.	2.61	1.34	-.01	.19*	-.08	.42**	-.03	.05					
8 Father now exp. div.	2.24	1.44	-.01	-.02	-.03	-.03	.46**	.08	.31**				
9 Disclose to mother	2.46	1.26	-.11	.03	-.04	.25**	.07	-.00	.44**	.17*			
10 Disclose to father	2.01	1.34	-.01	-.11	.18*	.02	.50**	.02	.02	.59**	.18*		
11 Disclose to STEP	1.46	1.24	-.22**	.08	-.06	-.01	.05	-.22**	.05	.22*	.11	.34**	
12 Stepfamily SAT	4.66	1.53	-.17*	.11	-.25**	-.01	.07	.04	.04	.31**	.16*	.25**	.48**

N = 152. exp. div. = explained the divorce; SF = stepfamily; STEP = stepparent; SAT = satisfaction.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

age at the time the target stepfamily was formed was not significantly related to current stepfamily satisfaction ($r = .04, p = .64$). However, the respondent's age at the time of the divorce was significantly and negatively correlated with current stepfamily satisfaction ($r = -.17, p = .03$). Therefore, age at the time of the divorce was included in the regression model as a control variable.

In addition, a t -test comparison of male and female ratings of current stepfamily satisfaction indicated that male respondents were significantly more satisfied ($M = 5.18, SD = 1.43$) than were female respondents ($M = 4.39, SD = 1.53$), $t = 3.03, p < .01$. Thus, sex of the respondent was included as a control variable in the regression model. Finally, a t -test comparison of the level of stepfamily satisfaction between respondents who selected a mother-stepfather home as their primary stepfamily ($n = 87, M = 4.91$) was significantly higher than those who selected a father-stepmother family ($n = 62, M = 4.38$), $t = 2.10, p < .05$. Therefore, stepfamily couple was also included as a control variable in the regression model.

Regression analyses

Two regression analyses were performed to test the hypotheses and provide the most accurate predictive profile for current stepfamily satisfaction. First, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted with age at the time of the divorce, sex of respondent, and stepfamily couple entered as control variables in the first block. As indicated in Table 2, the control variables accounted for 12% of the variance in current stepfamily satisfaction, but only sex of the respondent was a significant predictor ($p = .01$). The second block contained the positive and negative emotions experienced at the time of the divorce and accounted for an additional 5% of the variance in stepfamily satisfaction beyond

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Model Predicting Stepfamily Satisfaction.

Variables	ΔR^2	β	t	p value
Step 1: Control	.12			.00
Age at divorce		-.04	-.98	.33
Sex of respondent		-.20	-2.71	.01
Stepfamily couple		-.07	-.95	.34
Step 2: Emotions at divorce	.05			.01
Positive		-.04	-.56	.58
Negative		-.24	-3.06	.00
Step 3: Communication	.22			.00
Mother exp. div. at the time		.07	.67	.50
Father exp. div. at the time		-.04	-.43	.68
Mother now exp. div.		-.20	-1.96	.05
Father now exp. div.		.21	1.97	.05
Self-disclosure to mother		.11	1.32	.19
Self-disclosure to father		.22	.23	.82
Self-disclosure to stepparent		.40	5.24	.00

$N = 152$. exp. div. = explained the divorce.

the control variables. As predicted by H1, negative emotions experienced at the time of the divorce were a significant negative predictor of current stepfamily satisfaction. The third block contained communication factors present at the time of the divorce and at the current time. This block accounted for an additional 22% of the variance in current stepfamily satisfaction. Thus, H2 was confirmed. Specifically, the extent to which the respondent freely disclosed personal information to his or her stepparent was a significant positive predictor of current stepfamily satisfaction ($p < .01$). In addition, perceptions that mother had now explained the circumstances of the divorce was a negative, significant predictor ($p = .05$), whereas perceptions that father had now explained the circumstances of the divorce was a positive, significant predictor ($p = .05$). In total, the full regression analysis accounted for 39% of the variance in current stepfamily satisfaction.

Given the modest sample size, the magnitude of the betas, and the inclusion of several nonsignificant predictors in the full model, a second regression was run, excluding all nonsignificant variables included in the hierarchical regression. In the reparameterized regression model (see Table 3), self-disclosure to stepparent retained its significance. Moreover, perceptions that mother and father had now fully explained the circumstances of the divorce emerged as stronger predictors with a lower probability of error ($p = .04$ and $p = .02$), confirming their contribution to the current state of stepfamily satisfaction. Remarkably, even the trimmed regression model accounted for 37% of the variance in current stepfamily satisfaction, providing additional support for the second hypothesis.

Discussion

Taken together, these findings offer an informative profile of factors present at the time of the divorce, and presently, that contribute to stepfamily satisfaction. First, the consistent and strong contribution of negative emotions experienced

Table 3. Reparameterized Regression Model Predicting Stepfamily Satisfaction.

Variables	ΔR^2	β	t	p value
Step 1: Sex of respondent	.06	-.18	-2.47	.02
Step 2: Neg. emotion at divorce	.06	-.22	-3.07	.00
Step 3: Communication	.20			.00
Mother exp. div. at the time		.07	.78	.44
Father exp. div. at the time		-.07	-.69	.49
Mother now explained		-.20	-2.06	.04
Father now explained		.24	2.27	.02
Self-disclosure to mother		.15	1.90	.06
Self-disclosure to father		.03	.26	.79
Self-disclosure to stepparent		.38	5.15	.00

$N = 152$; exp. div. = explained the divorce

at the time of the divorce is an indication of the lingering relevance of an emotional schema developed in childhood or early adolescence. Although the level of negative emotions experienced was relatively low ($M = 1.75$ on a 0–4 point scale), for those respondents who experienced them, the consequences were meaningful. The anger, fear, confusion, hurt, disappointment, and sadness experienced during the dissolution of a family of origin might become salient in unconscious ways when experiencing the dynamics of a second family. For example, feelings of sadness and hurt are difficult to express when evoked by circumstances beyond a child's or adolescent's control. As a result, the complicated emotions associated with the divorce might be more easily expressed as anger, which fosters a sense of control through direct and assertive expression toward a target (parent or stepparent; Maldonado, 2009). To the extent this expression continues through the stepfamily formation, the conflict that ensues will reduce stepfamily satisfaction. Even more nuanced effects of negative emotions experienced at the time of the divorce might, ironically, become salient when the stepfamily becomes close and rewarding. Affective memories of the painful loss of the previous "happy" family might arouse a protective skepticism that the affection, support, trust, and stability within the stepfamily will endure, thereby constraining the degree of satisfaction felt.

Second, the profile of communication factors that contribute to current stepfamily satisfaction is intriguing. Although disclosure with mother approached significance in the reparameterized regression model ($p = .06$), the noteworthy predictor of stepfamily satisfaction is self-disclosure to the stepparent. The strong positive contribution evident in both regression models is a manifestation of the unique structural interdependence of individuals within a stepfamily and the roles they assume (Gosselin & David, 2007). Studies of stepfamily interactions have identified several aspects of communication and relationship quality that facilitate a stepchild's preference for disclosive communication with a stepparent. For example, when there is conflict between a child and his or her parent, the stepparent might serve as an outlet for stress and anxiety (Gosselin & David, 2007). In addition, when a stepparent is warm and supportive, he or she might be considered more of a friend and confidant than the parent who has to enact the role of disciplinarian (Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998; Fine, Ganong, & Coleman, 1997). Indeed, the profile that emerged here might reflect the presence of positive regard and affective certainty between the respondent and his or her stepparent, which emerged as fundamental dimensions in Schrod's (2006) Stepparent Relationship Index. As often noted in the research, these interaction processes are more likely in families constituted of a mother and stepfather, most likely due to the fact that the stepfather typically yields the control of daily affairs to his stepchildren's mother. By contrast, in a father-stepmother family structure, the stepmother is often expected to assume the role

of mother, organizing the family and enforcing rules of proper behavior (Fine & Kurdek, 1992). In this sample, approximately 60% of respondents were in a mother and stepfather family structure, which might increase the relevance of disclosure to a stepparent. However, this does not detract from the vivid insight it provides into stepfamily satisfaction. That is, when communication with the person who now enacts the role of mother or father is open and personal, the stepchild feels more satisfied in that family, despite lingering negative emotions about the divorce.

In addition to stepparent disclosure, the role of parental openness in having explained the circumstances of the divorce was a strong predictor of respondents' current feelings of satisfaction in the stepfamily. The significant positive contribution of their father having now fully explained the divorce is not surprising, given the high positive correlation evident in Table 1. The fact that during and after the divorce, most respondents lived with their mother might have limited the opportunity for their father to discuss the circumstances of the divorce as it occurred. Thus, the perception that their father has now fully explained the divorce might induce a sense of closure, acceptance, or reconnection with the father that facilitates greater comfort and satisfaction within a stepfamily, regardless of the couple type. What is surprising, however, is the fact that mother having now explained the divorce emerged as a significant negative predictor in both regression models, particularly the reparameterized model. The fact that the bivariate correlation (Table 1) between mother having now explained the divorce and current stepfamily satisfaction was not significant suggests a possible suppression effect. After controlling for the influence of sex of respondent, negative emotions experienced at the time of the divorce, father having now explained the divorce, and self-disclosure to stepparent, its function as a type of communication that is associated with lower stepfamily satisfaction emerged. Previous research consistently points to mother's role as the disciplinarian (e.g., Moore & Cartwright, 2005) and as a gatekeeper with the children after divorce. Moreover, mothers might discourage continued contact and relationships with the father if they disclose negative information about the divorce to their children. So by itself, mother explaining the divorce is unrelated to stepfamily satisfaction, until we control for the other variables in the model, at which point mother's explanation negatively predicts their satisfaction.

Limitations and future directions

Although the findings presented here expand our knowledge of the emotional and communicative factors that encourage or constrain satisfaction within stepfamilies from the young adult stepchild's perspective, several limitations should be noted. First, the sample was predominantly female (66%). Given the

relatively greater stepfamily satisfaction experienced by the male respondents compared to the female respondents, efforts to recruit a more gender-balanced sample are recommended for future research.

Second, although the sample used here reflects the national demographic trend of favoring mother-stepfather parental couples in stepfamilies, it might have influenced the results in subtle ways. For example, the inherently more involved and authoritative role of the biological mother within day-to-day stepfamily functioning might induce conflict and annoyance among the young adults in the family. By contrast, the "weekend" father who provides more pleasure and fewer restrictions could contribute to his relatively more positive role in stepfamily satisfaction. Future research would benefit from the inclusion of more father-stepmother families to provide a basis for comparison of the dynamics within the two stepfamily structures and their role in stepfamily satisfaction.

Finally, the quality of the relationship between the biological parents and between the stepparent and nonresidential parent are potentially important factors in stepfamily satisfaction. For example, negative feelings toward a former spouse or his or her current partner might be communicated to stepchildren in ways that undermine the efforts to build cohesion in a stepfamily. Although obtaining data from parents as well as their young adult children is difficult, it is a necessary piece in attempting to construct the complicated puzzle of stepfamily satisfaction.

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