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Abstract
This study explored the experience and expression of emotions of adult stepchildren during four critical events in stepfamily life. During semistructured, in-depth interviews, 57 adult stepchildren shared stories about four critical events: the parental divorce, remarriage of one of the parents, an event in the stepfamily that generated feeling more like a family, and an event in the stepfamily that generated feeling less like a family. A total of 402 pages of single-spaced transcripts were coded for emotion, target, and expression of emotion resulting in positive and negative emotion categories and subcategories for all four critical events. Five research questions centered on the emotions commonly experienced during the four aforementioned critical events, the targets of disclosure, and the patterns that indicate a tendency to manage emotion expression.

Keywords: divorce, emotion, expression, stepchildren, stepfamilies, stepparents

Divorce and remarriage represent two of the most challenging and emotional transitions that family members can experience, particularly when they involve children. From the uncertainty that often characterizes postdivorce family relationships (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003b), to feeling caught between different family members (Afifi, 2003; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007), to the dialectical contradictions and relational ambivalence associated with stepparent–stepchild and nonresidential parent–child relationships (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004; Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006), adolescent and young adult children face a number of emotional challenges as they interact and negotiate a new set of relationships and roles that accompany becoming a stepfamily (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Schrodt & Braithwaite, in press). Social scientists have devoted the better part of three decades to investigating stepfamily relationships in the hopes of furthering our theoretical and pragmatic understandings of how stepfamilies function (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Sweeney, 2010). Despite the value of this research, however, the experience and the expression of emotions during the development of a stepfamily has received far less attention. In the two most recent decades in review, for example, Sweeney (2010) and Coleman et al. (2000) summarized empirical research on remarriage and stepfamily relationships from more than 900 publications over the last 20 years. Although improvements in emotional well-being are briefly cited as one outcome of healthy transitions to remarriage and stepfamily formation (e.g., Hughes & Waite, 2009), by and large, systematic inquiries into the emotional landscape of stepfamily members are relatively absent from both reviews. Given the potential ambivalence and unique emotional challenges that children of all ages face as their parents divorce, remarry, or create a new stepfamily, such a void in the literature warrants further research.

Recently, Normand (2010) argued that "the communicative challenges associated with the divorce and remarriage process tend to be more difficult for the children to cognitively and emotionally process. . . . These communicative challenges are often accompanied by the experience and expression of intense emotion" (pp. 1–2). Consequently, our goal in this investigation was to explore the particularly complicated emotional landscape that characterizes the formation and development of stepfamilies from the perspective of young adult stepchildren who have experienced the process. This goal was motivated not only by the need to enrich scholarship and provide a foundation for future researchers, but also by the contributions such knowledge will make to the families and professionals who deal with the challenges associated with stepfamily development. Although stepfamilies do not necessarily encounter conflict intensity and frequency to a greater degree than first-marriage families (Ganong & Coleman, 1994), they do entail unique emotional profiles in both experience and expression stemming from the loss of one family system and the formation of a subsequent one.

Affect in Stepfamilies

Much like first-marriage families, stepfamilies are made up of individuals linked through interdependence, interaction norms, and role expectations (Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2013). However, for the stepfamily, these ties often span two physical locations; are both preexisting and emergent; are accepted, negotiated, or rejected; and may differ within subsets of the total family system (e.g., mom and daughter vs. mom and stepdaughter; Ganong & Coleman, 2000, 2004). Moreover, the roles of family members are often ambiguous and confusing, especially for children, when a family is dismantled and new stepfamily members enter the role previously held by a biological family member (e.g., Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Schrodt & Braithwaite, in press). Although a divorce decree legally dissolves the role relationship of husband and wife, it cannot dissolve the affective links that the ex-spouses/coparents and children associate with their relationship and roles established through their shared history and circumstances of the divorce (e.g., Schrodt, Baxter, McBride, Braithwaite, & Fine, 2006).

When a stepfamily is formed, children are often challenged to navigate the difficult task of (re)negotiating roles and relationships for both themselves and others (Schrodt & Braithwaite, in press). As Koenig Kellas, LeClair-Underberg, and Normand (2008) found, stepchildren accommodate this challenge when selecting terms of address that reflect their personal view of a family member's role while also reflecting sensitivity to biological family members. For example, stepchildren use formal ("my dad's wife"), familiar ("I call my stepdad Curtis"), and familial ("just sister" for stepsister or "dad" for stepfather) terms of address (p. 248). Moreover, they might also alter the reference term in relevant contexts, as when talking with a biological father they might restrain the use of "dad" (familial) for a stepfather and encourage the use of his first name instead (familiar). Implicit in a stepchild's designation of a stepfamily member as familial is the fact that stepfamilies are not only structural reformulations, but are also affective reformulations. The term *dad* (rather than stepdad) might communicate the belief that this man does not simply perform in the role as husband of my mother, but in the role as my parent with the affection and respect that typically accompanies the role. By contrast, to refer to a stepmother as "my dad's wife" might indicate an emotional distance (or absence of affection and respect) felt toward the woman who has assumed that role.

Unfortunately, the emotional consequences for children when they experience role ambiguity in the stepfamily have not been directly addressed in empirical inquiries. The research on emotions elicited in role-related contexts for first-marriage families does, however, invite interesting speculation. In a study of parenting practices

and emotional responses in adolescents (i.e., 14–18 years old), Padilla-Walker (2008) found that parenting practices (e.g., induction vs. power assertion) were likely to evoke different emotions based on the context in which they were used by parents. Open-ended responses from her sample revealed that the following emotions were most likely to be experienced by the children: positive emotions (happy, relief), negative emotions (upset, anger, frustration), and guilt emotions (guilt, feeling bad, ashamed) in various contexts, such as having told a lie or having performed a spontaneous good deed. Of particular relevance to this study is the fact that the outward directed negative emotions of upset, anger, and frustration were less likely to be experienced in disciplinary contexts when the parent used power assertive messages, but the more inward-directed emotion of guilt was more likely to be experienced. The question this finding raises for stepfamilies is whether an adult who has been given the role of stepparent through remarriage and enacts the role as disciplinarian using power assertive messages would evoke the same emotional response of guilt. We might assume that the same pattern would be manifested unless role ambiguity or role rejection intercedes. In this situation, it is likely that anger would be experienced and possible conflict would ensue.

Although limited, some research has more directly assessed emotions experienced by children and young adults within stepfamilies. When specific emotions are studied, they tend to be those evoked by the behaviors of parents during the divorce process or when children are observing parental conflict. For example, based on the drawings and verbal descriptions of children and adolescents, Oppawsky (2000) identified emotional reactions to the bickering, arguing, and fighting they had observed during the divorce of their parents. As might be expected in this context, the emotions of sadness, shame, anger, aggression, hostility, hate, and fear emerged. It is important to note, of course, that not all divorces and stepfamilies entail hostile and conflictual interactions between parents (e.g., Afifi, 2008). Benign dissolutions of a family might actually evoke a sense of loss and aloneness that is more akin to grief than sadness (cf. Afifi & Keith, 2004). Further, even in those situations that do involve conflict and aggressive behaviors between spouses, children might, ironically, experience profound relief and happiness when the parents finally separate because peace and tranquility in the home is so appreciated (e.g., Amato & Keith, 1991).

A somewhat broader approach is reflected in studies of more diffuse affective states prompted by factors within the emerging stepfamily. For example, the feeling of "belonging" experienced by children within a stepfamily is a positive affective state predicted by the relationships that adolescents have with their residential parents (both biological and stepparents), independent of age, gender, and type of stepfamily (Leake, 2007). Subsequent research specifying the qualities of these relationships, particularly

for stepfathers, indicates that positive relationships are likely to develop early and be maintained when relational qualities of the stepfather include warmth and support, both of which indicate willingness to be emotionally expressive and display positive regard, affection, and caring for the stepchild (e.g., Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999; Schrodt, 2006). Likewise, the stepchild's feelings of acceptance for the stepfather, when accompanied with less role ambiguity and greater affection, contribute to a perceived closer relationship (Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright, & Seymour, 2010).

A less positive affective state experienced by some adolescents and young adults during the divorce and early stages of the stepfamily is the feeling of "being caught" in the middle between their parents (e.g., Afifi, 2003; Afifi & Schrodt, 2003a; Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008). This feeling is evoked when "parents involve children in their disputes, request that the child take sides, mediate the conflict, expound on the parent's negative characteristics, or have the child relay sensitive information to the other parent" (McManus & Donovan, 2012, p. 260). Not only do feelings of being caught influence the quality of the relationship with parents (Afifi & McManus, 2010; Afifi & Schrodt, 2003a), mental health (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007), and overall family satisfaction (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007), they may also function as an interpretive filter during postdivorce and stepfamily disclosures in much the same way that resentment does. That is, when a parent is trying to present negative information about the divorce or the other parent to a young adult child who perceives the parent to be a competent communicator (e.g., good listener, communicates feelings clearly), the parent's use of ambiguity is likely to be interpreted as indifference or even deceptive equivocation when the young adult feels caught.

Taken together, the handful of studies on emotions and affective states in stepfamilies that do exist are important and informative; however, the emotional response experienced and expressed by the children during the developmental phases or turning points of the stepfamily merit focused and systematic empirical attention. An emotional profile that extends across important transitional events in the formation and enactment of a stepfamily can serve as the basis for additional empirical tests of factors that predict the emotional antecedents and consequences of these events. Moreover, establishing a profile of how emotions experienced by stepchildren are expressed, if at all, and to whom, allows family scholars to further explore the reasons for these patterns.

This Investigation

Our study provides an initial profile of the emotions experienced and expressed by young adult stepchildren as they reflected on four key points in the family dissolution and the development of their stepfamily: the parental divorce, remarriage of one

of the parents, an event in the stepfamily that generated feeling more like a family, and an event in the stepfamily that generated feeling less like a family. We chose these points in time as they represented critical events in stepfamily life. The starting point of the stepfamily, including parental divorce and remarriage, represents key critical events in the early stages of stepfamily life. These events, along with rituals like remarriage, can be sites of strong emotions in families (Baxter et al., 2009; Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995). We chose the two points of feeling more and less like a family to provide a point of comparison with Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson's (1999) study on turning points in stepfamilies and stepchildren's perceptions of "feeling like a family" at each critical juncture. Although we might expect strong emotions in the negative events that precipitated feeling less like a family, we were at the same time committed to understanding the role of emotions during events that were more positive as well (Afifi, 2008; Schrodt & Braithwaite, in press). Our goal was not to understand emotions of stepchildren at one point in time, but to examine their experiences at several points in the formative years of the stepfamily.

Given our intention to represent the feelings that young adults recall as labeled in their own terms, we also adopted a somewhat broader definition of emotion than might be preferred in a theoretically grounded study. That is, emotion scholars have carefully distinguished the construct, emotion, as one type of affective state (see Planalp, Metts, & Tracy, 2010). As such, an *emotion* is a relatively brief state of arousal in response to a stimulus that varies in its intensity and valence. Scholars also distinguish the basic or primary emotions of anger, fear, sadness, disgust, and happiness from secondary or blended emotions such as jealousy, embarrassment, hurt, and forgiveness (Fitness, 1996). Given our locus of interest in the complicated domain of stepfamily transitions, we used the term *emotion* to refer to other affective states as well. For example, an adolescent or young adult might not experience pure anger or sadness or fear at the time of his or her parents' divorce, but might well feel confusion, worry, or apprehension; a child might not feel anger or hate when speaking to a stepparent, but might feel a negative arousal commonly known as dislike. Thus, although we recognize the need for theoretical distinctions, we also argue for the usefulness of including a broad array of affective states within the term *emotions.* With this clarification in mind, our investigation was prompted by five research questions:

RQ1: What emotions are most commonly experienced during the initial phase of the stepfamily formation, specifically the divorce of parents? Are these emotions more likely to be disclosed to mothers or fathers?

RQ2: What emotions are most commonly experienced during the second phase of the stepfamily formation, the remarriage? To what extent are these emotions disclosed to stepparents as well as biological parents?

RQ3: What is the nature of the events that make stepchildren view their stepfamily as more like a family? What are the emotions experienced during these events and to whom are they disclosed?

RQ4: What is the nature of the events that make stepchildren view their stepfamily as less like a family? What are the emotions experienced during these events and to whom are they disclosed?

RQ5: Across the four developmental transitions, is there a discernible pattern that indicates a tendency to manage emotion expression (e.g., inhibit expression of felt emotions or simulate emotions not felt) depending on the target of one's disclosure?

Method

We collected data by engaging adult stepchildren in semistructured, in-depth interviews (Spradley, 1979). Our goal was to understand the vantage point of stepchildren, in particular how they experienced and negotiated their emotions, from their perspective and in their own words (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Spradley, 1979).

Participants

Our participants included 57 adult stepchildren (35 female, 22 male) whose mean age was 23.84 years (*SD* = 4.93). The participants were mostly White (78.9%), which represents the population of the large Midwestern university at which data were collected. Five of the participants reported they were Black, two were Hispanic, and one each identified themselves as Asian, Arabic, White/Hispanic, and White/Native American. Participants met four criteria: (a) they were at least 19 years of age (per the directive of the university institutional review board [IRB], unless they had parental permission [one participant was 18]), (b) they needed to indicate that they were old enough to clearly remember the time their stepfamily started and the time period when their parent and stepparent were married (whether they attended the ceremony or not), (c) their parent and stepparent must have gotten married during the family's first 4 years, and (d) the stepfamily must have lived together at least 25% of the time during its first 4 years.

The participants represented stepfamilies that had been in existence for an average of 14.72 years (*SD* = 7.27). The mean number of years their mothers had been divorced was 12.11 years (*SD* = 10.14) and for fathers it was 7.67 years (*SD* = 5.51). In addition to the parent and stepparent, participants' stepfamilies included biological children (*M* = 2.16, *SD* = 1.06), maternal stepsiblings (*M* = .96, *SD* = 1.26), paternal stepsiblings (*M* = .61, *SD* = 1.07) and, in some families, half-siblings (maternal *M* = .52, *SD* = .93; paternal *M* = .50, *SD* = .97).

Procedures

After the participants completed IRB consent procedures, they first provided demographic data about themselves and their stepfamily. Second, the interviewer sought to elicit stepchildren's narratives (e.g., McAdams, 1993) about their stepfamily at different points in time and to probe for the emotions they experienced and expressed (or not) during the time period represented by these four narratives. Interviewers asked the participants to tell the story of (a) the circumstances surrounding the beginning of their stepfamily, including the parental divorce, (b) at the remarriage of their parent, (c) at a time they felt more like a family, and (d) at a time they felt like less of a family. Interviewers stressed that participants might have been feeling both positive and negative emotions and more than one emotion at a time. Interviewers probed for participants to reflect as completely as they were able on what they were feeling during this time in their stepfamily life. Interviewers asked for the stepchildren's understanding of how different stepfamily members understood how they were feeling and probed about their parent, stepparent, siblings, stepsiblings, and their nonresidential parent. Interviewers asked whether and how the participants revealed or masked their emotions and why they made the choices they did concerning revealing or concealing their emotions. Finally, interviewers asked the participants their ideal version of what they wished they had, or could have done or said, and what advice they would have for stepfamily members about understanding and expressing their emotions in their stepfamily. Each interviewer transcribed her interviews word for word and the analysis was based on 402 pages of single-spaced interview transcripts.

Data Analysis

Coding the variables of interest within the transcripts proceeded through several phases. First, to identify all possible terms that would be counted as emotional experience, the first author and a graduate student assistant who was not involved in the interview or transcription phase of the project independently generated a list of all affect terms appearing in descriptions of each event. When appropriate, these terms were clustered into conceptually similar groupings (e.g., "happy, excited," "angry, hostile, bitter," "hurt, abandoned, betrayed"). The same procedure was followed for all events that were reported by respondents as increasing feeling more like a family or feeling less like a family. For example, trips, play days, vacations, holidays (Christmas, Thanksgiving), Sunday dinners, and parties or gatherings with extended family were clustered under the more general label of time together as a family.

Second, the first author and the graduate assistant returned to the transcripts to isolate examples of emotion management when respondents described how they expressed their emotions. Ekman and Friesen's (1975) nonverbal display rules were used

but expanded to include indications of verbal manipulation of emotion expression as well. Examples of simulation (displaying an emotion not felt), inhibition (not displaying an emotion that is felt), intensification (exaggerating the display of emotion), deintensification (minimizing the display), and masking (displaying one emotion when a different emotion is actually felt) were identified and listed under each term. In addition, because some respondents reported that others (e.g., mom or stepdad) just "knew" how they were feeling or that their disruptive actions (e.g., being rude toward a stepsibling) signaled their resentment, a category of knew/nonverbal was also included. Finally, a category for full and open disclosure was added.

In the third phase, coding sheets were constructed for each of the turning points providing columns for the emotion reported, the target to whom it was expressed, and the degree of expression. These coding sheets were given to two undergraduate interpersonal students who were trained using these lists of emotions, turning point events, and examples of the display rules.

In the final phase, each undergraduate student coded 25 interviews, the graduate assistant coded the remaining 7, and the first author coded all 57 interviews. A comparison of the coding sheets revealed very few discrepancies and these were resolved during discussion.

Results

The first research question focused on the emotions experienced during the first phase of the stepfamily formation, the divorce, which participants included as part of their stepfamily origin narrative. As indicated in Table 1, far more negative emotions were experienced during the divorce than were positive. Not only were 14 categories of negative emotions reported during the interviews, the total number of negative emotions experienced comprised 72% of all emotions experienced during the divorce transition. The strong outward-directed emotion of anger and related affects of bitterness and hostility were the dominant negative emotion category (15%) with more diffuse states of less intensity such as apprehension, sadness, and hurt also reported. Although this is not surprising, it is noteworthy that the four categories of positive emotions together accounted for 28% of emotions experienced during divorce. This is a fact seldom acknowledged in the research on divorce.

In terms of expression, mothers were far more likely to be the recipient of emotional disclosure than were fathers (65% of all disclosures). It might seem counterintuitive that not only were the weaker negative emotional states such as "stressed" and "worried" disclosed to mothers, but also the strong negative emotions of anger. However, there are several possible explanations for this profile. First, the anger experienced was often described by respondents as being evoked by their father (e.g., "I was just so mad at my dad I didn't even want to talk to him so I just stayed in my room until he

Table 1. Frequency and Percentage of Emotions Experienced During Divorce and Frequency of Full Expression to Parents

	Experience		Expression	
	Frequency	%	Mother	Father
Positive emotions				
Happy, excited	22	17	6	3
Liking	6	5	3	0
Hopeful, supportive, comfortable	7	5	5	1
Forgiveness	1	1	0	0
Total positive experienced	36	28		
Total positive expressed			14	4
Negative emotions				
Dislike	9	7	3	0
Angry, hostile, bitter	20	15	9	5
Hate	6	5	1	1
Resentment	5	4	3	0
Apprehensive, afraid, confused	13	10	3	1
Upset, stressed, worried, nervous	7	5	5	0
Sad	10	8	4	2
Disappointed	1	1	0	0
Hurt, abandoned, betrayed	10	8	3	2
Embarrassed	1	1	1	0
Guilty	4	3	1	0
Disgust	1	1	1	0
Pity	1	1	0	0
Jealousy, envy	4	3	2	0
Total negative experienced	92	72		
Total negative expressed			36	11
Surprise	2	2	0	0
Total	130		50	15
Indifferent/no affect	6			

Percentages in all tables are rounded to whole numbers.

left and then I talked to my mom") and for various reasons, could not be communicated to him (e.g., "I tried to talk to my dad but he just sort of tuned me out"). Second, given the role of mothers as the family care provider and the empirical evidence that women are indeed better able to provide emotional support than men, both in actual practice (Burleson & Kunkel, 2006) and in perceptual attributions (Uno, Uchino, & Smith, 2002), the respondents' greater willingness to disclose to mothers rather than fathers might reflect broader gender patterns. Finally, the prevailing norm in Western cultures is for children to maintain residence with their mother rather than leaving the home to stay with their father. To the extent that this practice was also true for most of our interviewees, they might simply have had more opportunity to discuss their feelings with their mother than with their father.

The second research question focused on the remarriage, which officially and publicly reconstitutes the family system, albeit with acquired as well as biological linkages among members. As indicated in Table 2, the remarriage turning point appears to be less emotional for the children who experience it than the period of divorce. Indeed, the young adults in our sample reported only 75 affective responses compared to 130 during the divorce. In addition, the emotions experienced were almost equally positive and negative. Although the single category of happy and excited constituted 40% of all affective responses, apprehension, stress, and worry were still salient (17%). Thus, in much the same way that a divorce can elicit positive emotions, a remarriage can elicit negative emotions as children witness or participate in a wedding ceremony that symbolizes a lifetime commitment that, ironically, did not happen for the marriage of their biological parents. If some degree of apprehension and worry is experienced, even when experiencing their mother's joy, it is understandable.

Table 2. Frequency and Percentage of Emotions Experienced During Mother's Remarriage and Frequency of Full Expression to Mother, Stepfather, and Father

	Experience		Expression		
	Frequency	%	Mother	Stepfather	Father
Positive emotions					
Happy, excited	30	40	10	1	0
Liking	3	4	1	2	0
Hopeful, supportive, comfortable	5	7	2	1	0
Forgiveness	0	0	0	0	0
Total positive experienced	38	51			
Total positive expressed			13	4	0
Negative emotions					
Dislike	1	1	0	0	1
Angry, hostile, bitter	3	5	1	0	1
Hate	1	1	0	0	0
Resentment	3	5	0	0	0
Apprehensive, afraid, confused	7	9	2	0	2
Upset, stressed, worried, nervous	6	8	1	1	2
Sad	2	3	0	0	1
Disappointed	1	1	0	0	1
Hurt, abandoned, betrayed	3	5	0	0	2
Embarrassed	1	1	0	0	0
Guilty	1	1	0	0	0
Disgust	1	1	0	0	0
Pity	1	1	0	0	0
Jealousy, envy	3	5	1	0	0
Total negative experienced	34	47			
Total negative expressed			5	1	10
Surprise	3	5	0	0	1
Total	75		18	5	11
Indifferent/no affect	10				

The expression of emotions associated with a mother's remarriage provides insight into how progression through the transitional phases of stepfamily formation reconfigures the stepchild's perception of appropriate targets for emotional disclosure. In the case of excitement and happiness, not a single young adult within our sample recalled sharing those emotions with his or her biological father. Although not explicitly stated, several respondents alluded to the negative consequences for their father in such comments as "no need to tell my dad how happy mom was to have all of us at her wedding" and "I told Steve (her stepfather) how much I liked him now compared to when I first met him, but um I didn't ever tell my dad that when he asked me how the wedding went." By contrast, the negative emotions elicited by the remarriage were more likely to be shared with their father, but withheld from their mother or stepfather. This preference was no doubt motivated in part by a protective orientation toward mom as well as the assumption that dad would understand and feel empathy when negative affect associated with mom's remarriage was disclosed.

RQ2 addressed emotions experienced and expressed during the father's remarriage as well. Unfortunately, relatively few interviewees talked about their father's remarriage. As a result, only 20 total emotions were mentioned. Of these, four were anger and three were dislike for the stepmom. Anger associated with dad's remarriage was fully disclosed to mom and dislike was disclosed to mom as well as to the stepmother who elicited it.

RQ3 addressed two issues associated with the important transition phase that we term feeling more like a family. The first of these involves the need to identify specific events that prompted the perception of family cohesion and closeness. Table 3 provides this information. Consistent with prior research (Baxter et al. 1999; Schrodt, Soliz, & Braithwaite, 2008), the two more frequently mentioned categories were time together as a family and messages or actions that validate the legitimacy of a person's role within the family (e.g., as a dad, mom, or sister). Together, these events made up 76% of the nonremarkable but influential family interactions and validating messages that promoted unity among the family members. Although special occasions that bring the immediate family as well as the extended family (e.g., grandparents) together were significant to some of the young adults in the sample, they seem to have a less salient role in formation of stepfamily unity than the less formal and more routine interactions.

However, this does not suggest that feeling more like a family is necessarily equivalent to becoming a stepfamily that is free of lingering difficulties. The young adults in the sample mentioned several areas of concern that continued to "test" the coherence of the stepfamily. These included, for example, the following: brother still harbors anger toward stepdad, sister won't accept the new baby half-sister, a stepbrother continues to disrupt the family during his visits, and problematic conversations with mother because she still resents the children's stepmom. Indeed, four respondents

Table 3. Frequencies and Percentages for Events Associated with Feeling More Like a Family

Event categories with examples	Frequency	%
Change in locations New residence	3	6

Time together as family
    Trips, play days, vacations
    Holidays (Christmas, Thanksgiving)
    Sunday dinners
    Parties, gatherings with extended family
	24	47

Special occasions
    Remarriage
    Stepchild's own wedding
    Baptism
    Graduation (high school, college)
    Birth of new family member (half-brother, sister's baby)
	8	16

Messages/actions that validate role as parent, child, family member
    Stepparent attending stepchild's event
    Stepchild and stepdad bonding while mom is out of town
    Stepdad's confirmation—"call me dad"
    Open communication—"talking to stepdad like he is my true father"
    Older brother accepts stepfather
    Maternal grandparents accept stepfather
    Mom/stepfather coconstructing rules for respondent's dating, activities, etc.
    Auto accidents or injury where stepparent provides care like a biological
        parent would do
	15	29

Parents commit to better behavior Mom and stepdad get off drugs	1	2
Total	51	
No particular event, just evolution over time	4	
Not possible to feel more like family Too many or irreconcilable differences	4	

could not identify any occasions when they felt more like a family because antagonistic and destructive interactions were still strongly visible.

The second issue entailed in RQ3 concerns the emotions experienced by stepchildren during these events. As might be expected, the emotions described by our respondents were overwhelmingly positive. Most closely linked to the feeling of being more like a family were the general affective states of feeling welcomed, accepted, and included ($n = 7$), the emotions of happy and excited ($n = 33$), content and relaxed ($n = 5$), and for the first time during the interviews the emotion of love ($n = 5$). Also for the first time during the coding process, all positive emotions were fully expressed or

displayed nonverbally to relevant family members without distinctions among roles (e.g., as open with stepdad as with mother). The only exception to this positive affect profile was the occasional feeling of sadness ($n = 3$) experienced by the respondent in realizing that although they "felt more like a family," this was not the family of their birth and they wished the original family could be restored.

RQ4 parallels RQ3 when considering the transition phase, which we termed feeling less like a family. As evident in Table 4, there is much greater variability and breadth

Table 4. Frequencies and Percentages for Events Associated with Feeling Less Like a Family

Event categories with examples	Frequency	%

Change in locations
    Move in with father
    Move away from friends
	3	6

Change in traditions/norms
    New holiday traditions
    New Sunday activities
	4	8

Parents' problems
    Mother discovers stepfather's affair
    Stepfather attempts suicide
    Stepfather very ill
    Mother's father—cancer
	6	12

Loss or absence of parent
    Mother dies
    Mother and stepfather separate/divorce
    Stepfather deployed
	7	14

Distancing messages, behaviors, or actions
    Half-brother says respondent looks "different" from the other children
    Stepsister says respondent is "not part of this family"
    Stepparent treats own children differently from stepchildren
	6	12

Role tensions
    Father would not come to hospital at birth of respondent's baby
        because stepfather was there
    Respondent hugged stepfather after football game
    Respondent calls stepfather "dad" even though father said not to
	6	12

Conflict between family members
    Brother–stepbrother
    Father–stepfather
    Respondent–stepfather or stepmother
	10	20

Intrusions or disruptions
    Dad brought new wife and son to graduation
    Stepmom repeatedly intrudes in respondent's private life
    Stepfamily members disruptive at grandparent's funeral
	8	16

Total	50	
No event (never felt like a family)	4	

in these factors compared to those facilitating feeling more like a family. Not only did eight categories (compared to five for feeling more like a family) emerge from the interview data, but the frequency distribution across these categories is relatively similar. However, in terms of affective responses, dislike, anger, apprehension, and sadness tend to be the primary emotions experienced. Table 5 presents a summary of the emotions experienced when feeling more like a family and the emotions experienced when feeling less like a family.

In terms of expression of these emotions, an interesting pattern emerged. The five positive emotions that were experienced were expressed to mother, perhaps because they were associated with the separation from father's family. Likewise, the weak negative emotions such as sad, worried, confused, and apprehensive were also fully expressed to mother because as noted previously, mothers tend to serve the emotional support function within families. Interestingly, however, the strong negative emotions

Table 5. Affective Responses to Feeling More Like a Family and Less Like a Family

	More like family		Less like family	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Positive emotions				
Happy, excited	33	58	3	4
Satisfied, welcomed, accepted	7	12	0	0
Content, relaxed, comfortable, relief	5	9	2	3
Love	3	5	0	0
Blessed	1	2	0	0
Grateful	2	4	0	0
Total positive	51	90	5	7
Negative emotions				
Dislike	0	0	0	0
Angry, hostile, bitter	0	0	13	17
Hate	0	0	1	1
Resentment	0	0	5	6
Apprehensive, afraid, confused	2	4	10	13
Upset, stressed, worried, nervous	2	4	9	12
Sad	2	4	17	22
Disappointed	0	0	2	3
Hurt, abandoned, betrayed	0	0	4	5
Embarrassed	0	0	4	5
Guilty	0	0	4	5
Disgust	0	0	0	0
Pity	0	0	0	0
Jealousy, envy	0	0	0	0
Annoyed, frustrated	0	0	3	4
Total negative	6	12	72	93
Total	57		77	
No event	3		3	
Never possible	4		3	

of anger and resentment were either suppressed and not disclosed to anyone (approximately 23%), were displayed nonverbally to anyone who happened to be present (approximately 8%), or were expressed verbally to the stepparent, stepsibling, or parent who evoked the emotion (approximately 14%). The relatively greater management of expression for the strong negative emotions is explored in more detail within the answer to the final research question.

RQ5 poses the integrative question of whether the management of emotion expression across all turning points is related systematically to the emotion experienced and the target of its expression. As indicated in Table 6, respondents did recall using emotion management strategies, but open expression ($n = 90$) and nonverbal signals and behaviors ($n = 108$) were far more common. A total of 32 instances of simulating an emotion not felt were reported, 30 instances of lessening the intensity of an emotion when expressing it were reported, 24 instances of expressing an emotion more intensely than it was felt, and 26 instances of expressing an emotion when a different emotion was experienced (masking). Finally, 38 respondents recalled inhibiting the expression of an emotion when actually wanting to express it, which differed from simply not expressing an emotion. For example, as one respondent described inhibiting her expression of anger, she stated: "I just wanted to scream at my stepsister, but I just walked out of the room." Moreover, had she said, "I just wanted to scream at my stepsister, but instead I smiled and told her how much fun she is to be with," she would have been masking the negative emotion she was actually experiencing by displaying a positive one in its place.

A profile of which members of the family are most likely to encounter full disclosure or nonverbal signals or behaviors also emerged. As might be expected from the previous analyses, almost half of all open disclosures of emotions (47%) were shared with a biological mother; only 20% were shared with a father and even fewer with a stepfather (14%). The profile shifts, however, when a stepchild is experiencing an emotion such as liking or affection and signals it through a spontaneous hug, or is experiencing an emotion such as resentment or anger and signals it through slamming doors or leaving the room abruptly. The primary target of these indirect displays tended to be the stepfather (25%), followed by the biological mother (23%), with the biological father receiving this type of expression less often (12%). As one respondent described it, "Everyone in the family [mother and stepfather] just knew I felt resentment because I was such a brat to my little stepbrother." Although indirect expression strategies for negative affect might help avoid tension and even conflict, they can also be problematic. They are inherently ambiguous and even though the stepchild assumes his or her target parent or sibling "just knows" what he or she is feeling, the intended emotion might not be inferred correctly or the negative displays might be attributed to a negative personality trait rather than to an emotional state. Such an attribution minimizes efforts to understand and cope with the emotion, but maximizes dismissive and distancing responses.

Table 6. Summary of Emotion Expression Management Strategies by Emotion Type and Role of Target

	Expression management strategy						
	Full	NV/Knew	Simulate	Deintensify	Intensify	Mask	Inhibit
Strong positive							
Mom	12	7	5	0	4	3	2
Stepdad	4	10	2	0	3	0	1
Dad	4	2	3	2	3	2	5
Stepmom	0	2	2	0	0	0	0
Siblings	3	5	1	0	0	0	2
Stepsiblings	0	4	3	0	2	0	0
Friends or grandparents	4	6	3	0	0	0	0
Total	27	36	19	2	12	5	10
Weak positive							
Mom	6	4	1	0	1	1	0
Stepdad	2	6	1	1	1	1	0
Dad	2	1	1	1	0	0	0
Stepmom	1	1	3	1	0	0	1
Siblings	3	2	1	0	1	0	0
Stepsiblings	2	3	1	2	0	1	0
Friends or grandparents	3	4	0	2	0	0	0
Total	19	21	8	7	3	3	1
Strong negative							
Mom	14	9	2	4	0	4	5
Stepdad	3	8	0	4	2	1	6
Dad	9	6	0	1	3	4	2
Stepmom	1	3	0	4	0	3	4
Siblings	8	2	0	0	0	2	3
Stepsiblings	2	1	0	2	0	2	3
Friends or grandparents	6	4	0	3	0	0	2
Total	43	33	2	18	5	16	25
Weak negative							
Mom	10	5	0	1	1	0	1
Stepdad	4	3	1	1	1	1	1
Dad	3	4	1	1	0	0	0
Stepmom	1	2	0	0	2	1	0
Siblings	4	1	1	0	0	0	0
Stepsiblings	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Friends or grandparents	3	3	0	0	0	2	2
Total	26	18	3	3	4	4	4

NV = nonverbal cues

Discussion

The results in this study allowed us to sketch a profile of the emotions experienced and expressed in the narratives of young adult stepchildren during four key points in time: the parental divorce, remarriage of one of the parents, an event in the stepfamily that generated feeling more like a family and an event in the stepfamily that generated feeling less like a family.

At the first point in time, as stepchildren reflected on parental divorce, not only were there more negative than positive emotions, but these negative emotions represented a wide variety of emotions coded in these data. The emotional profile at this stage in children's lives points to the hurt and disappointment that children experience at the divorce of their parents. Schrodt and Braithwaite (2010) stressed the powerful role that parental conflict might play in the loyalty divides that children experience and we might be seeing this manifested in the strong emotions children experienced during the divorce. In addition, several researchers have pointed to the emotional ambivalence children also experience (Afifi, 2003; Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2010). So although we found that stepchildren did experience strong emotions such as hurt and anger that might be expected at this stage, the emotional ambivalence that researchers describe might explain our discovery of the less intense emotions of apprehension, sadness, and hurt chronicled in the narratives in this study.

Even though participants experienced and expressed a preponderance of negative emotions it is important to stress that positive emotions at this stage accounted for almost a third of the emotions coded in the first narrative in this study. As we have noted, it is important to focus not just on stepfamily conflict and challenges, but also on positive aspects of stepfamilies as well. Our findings in this study mirror somewhat Baxter et al.'s (1999) findings, as they identified five distinct developmental pathways of stepfamily development. In their study, only two of the pathways, accounting for 19.6% of the families, were decidedly negative (stagnating and declining stepfamilies), whereas 52.9% of the families had what would be described as positive developmental experiences (accelerated and prolonged). A fifth pathway, high amplitude turbulent, which had striking ups and downs in their development, accounted for the remaining 21.6% of the families. Both their results and ours in this study draw our attention to the need to better understand the positive emotions that stepchildren experience and express. However, we would counterbalance this against the fact that later in the interview, four of our respondents could not identify an occasion when they felt more like a family.

In the second research question we explored stepchildren's experience and expression of emotions at the time of parental remarriage. We characterized this critical event as "less emotional" than the divorce period based on the much lower frequency

of strong negative emotions and the relatively equal ratio of positive (38) and negative (34) emotions experienced during this time. However, especially noteworthy were emotions of apprehension, confusion, stress, and worry on the part of the stepchildren. Baxter et al. (2009) elicited stepchildren's narratives surrounding the remarriage ceremony of their parent and found that most of the stepchildren identified the ceremony as empty when they could not themselves support or legitimate the wedding, when children could not participate in such a way as to feel that a family was being created (rather than simply a marriage of the parent and stepparent), or when the ritual was done in a way that they perceived devalued their original family. The emotions that stepchildren experienced and expressed at the time of remarriage seem to mirror the reactions to the remarriage as an empty ritual for most stepchildren. Our findings lend additional insight when we looked at the expression of emotions to mothers and fathers at this stage as we found that children rarely expressed positive emotions to fathers (and were more likely to express negative emotions) and were more likely to express positive emotions to their mothers. Our coding of the narratives in this study revealed several gender differences in stepchildren's experience and expression of emotion to their mothers and fathers. Family communication scholars interested in emotion should pay careful attention to these differences in future studies.

In the third and fourth research questions, we addressed two issues associated with the times that stepchildren could recall their stepfamily feeling less and then more like a family (Baxter et al., 1999). In the results, we noted the importance of positive everyday interaction in stepchildren's experience of positive emotions. In Baxter et al.'s (1999) study, for instance, quality time was the fourth most frequently reported event type and represented interactions such as those that occurred during leisure activities or talk about nonproblematic issues. This time was especially important between stepparents and stepchildren. In another study, Schrodt et al. (2008) found that stepchildren whose stepparents engaged in more everyday talk with them reported greater relational satisfaction. Similarly, Golish (2003) found that strong stepfamilies were more likely than struggling stepfamilies to engage in a variety of communication activities that encouraged greater levels of disclosure and openness among families, including more everyday talk, communicating clear rules and boundaries, engaging in family problem solving, and spending time together as a family. Clearly, researchers need to continue to examine the role of stepfamily interaction, especially everyday talk, on emotional experience and expression.

Finally, in answer to the last research question, when examining management of emotional expression we found that many stepchildren reported that they engaged in open expression and nonverbal signals or behaviors of their emotions to stepfamily members in a preponderance of cases. However, we did discover instances when stepchildren either simulated an emotion they were not feeling, lessened the intensity of

how they expressed an emotion, expressed an emotion when a different emotion was experienced, or inhibited the expression of an emotion when they desired to express it. Beginning with Hochschild (1983), scholars have studied "emotional labor" in organizations, described as when members perform, or at least project, certain emotions they perceive they are required to feel. Hochschild defined emotional labor as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (p. 7). Organizational scholars found that employees engage in emotional labor to influence the emotions of others (e.g., customers, coworkers) so that certain work-related goals can be achieved. Organizations might specify emotional display rules that identify appropriate emotions in particular situations as well as how those emotions should be expressed. Emotional labor requires the use of emotion regulation strategies such as faking an unfelt emotion or suppressing an inappropriate felt emotion (Gross, 1998). Although emotional labor might have positive benefits for organizations, effects on individual actors can result in dissatisfaction and burnout (Hochschild, 1983), especially when these behaviors are at odds with their own goals and desires and these discrepancies are significant for them or persist over a long time (Dieffendorff & Gosserand, 2003).

Our findings in this study point to instances of emotional labor among stepchildren and this should be of concern to researchers and practitioners as we do not have a clear implication of this behavior. It could be that emotional labor helps "keep the peace" in stepfamilies, but the cost of experiencing these emotions, but not expressing them, needs to be assessed, both for individual members and the stepfamily as a whole. In addition, we suspect that stepchildren are not the only stepfamily members engaging in emotional labor, and thus, future researchers might want to examine the emotional labor of both children and adults in stepfamilies. We can also see the utility of examining the rules developed in stepfamilies regarding revealing and concealing information. Consequently, communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 2002) could be a fruitful theoretical lens with which to better understand motivations for revealing and concealing emotions in stepfamilies, as well as the criteria family members use to make such decisions (e.g., gender).

There are several contributions resulting from our work in this study, but there are limitations as well. A strength of these data, and a departure from most emotions research, is the use of in-depth interviewing and qualitative data in which the emotional manifestations and communication of emotions (or not) to other members of the stepfamily were allowed to emerge naturally in the narrative of the participants. The interviewers were able to probe to elicit additional detail on the experience and expression of emotion as a result. However, allowing reflections on emotion to emerge naturally also made categorizing and coding extremely challenging. Similarly, the qualitative data set represented a number of different stepfamily types, lengths, and structures,

which is a strength for an interpretive analysis in which scholars seek to understand commonalities across cases from the actors' perspectives, but creates more of a challenge when trying to understand and measure differences across stepfamily types, within different stepfamily roles (e.g., stepmother, nonresidential father) or accounting for sex of different family members.

Our goal from this point forward is to use this exploratory study of stepchildren's experience and expression of emotion as a starting place to develop scale measures to test hypotheses that could be derived from these qualitative profiles. For example, quantitative data would enable factor analysis confirmation of emotion clusters, and would allow for control of possible intervening variables such as age at time of divorce and sex of respondent. This present exploratory study provides an important starting place in creating a profile of stepchildren's emotions and represents a first for family communication researchers to understand the role and complexities of how emotions are experienced and expressed in this important family type.

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