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# Telling the Story of Stepfamily Beginnings: The Relationship between Young-adult Stepchildren's Stepfamily Origin Stories and their Satisfaction with the Stepfamily

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**Abstract**

The current study adopts a narrative perspective in examining the content of 80 stepchildren's stepfamily origin stories. Results reveal five types of stepfamily origin stories: *Sudden, Dark-sided, Ambivalent, Idealized,* and *Incremental.* Results support the hypothesis that story type would predict differences in family satisfaction; stepchildren who described their stepfamily origins as Idealized were more satisfied than those whose origins were Dark-sided or Sudden. Overall, participants framed their stepfamily identity more positively when their stepfamily beginnings were characterized by closeness, friendship, and even expected ups and downs, rather than when they were left out of the process of negotiating or forming the stepfamily and when the beginnings were tainted by issues they considered to be dark. Stepparents or practitioners may benefit from these findings

by examining the means by which stepparents may involve stepchildren in the process of stepfamily courtship, facilitate closeness, and set up realistic expectations for negotiating stepfamily life.

Family development is complicated by a multitude of factors, including both expected and unexpected family stressors (Afifi & Nussbaum, 2006). Although divorce and stepfamily development can vary in the extent to which they are experienced as stressors, the majority of stepfamilies experience at least some complication or difficulty as they develop (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). For example, research suggests that family development can be understood both from a life cycle or life course perspective (see Afifi & Nussbaum) by focusing on developmental stages (e.g., married without children, parents with young children) as well as social, cultural, and historical factors, respectively. The development of stepfamilies may be particularly complicated given the intersection of family systems in various stages of family development (e.g., the merging of a system with older adolescent children and one with younger children). Moreover, the adult parents have voluntarily established a prior intimate bond to which the formation of the stepfamily is the next stage of development, yet the stepchildren might not be at the same developmental stage at the time of stepfamily formation. Although stepfamily development has been studied by researchers and clinicians, we know little about stepfamily beginnings including adult courtship, the initiation of what will become a stepparent-stepchild relationship, the decision to form a new family unit, decisions surrounding household formation, and so forth (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). In other words, we know very little about the first chapter of stepfamily life. Especially neglected is the perspective of the stepchild (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Schrodt, 2006). Yet in the United States, an estimated 13% of surveyed adults report having a stepchild (Pew Research Center, 2011). Because of the potentially complicated nature of stepfamily formation as well as its potential for creating individual and family stress, understanding the beginning of the stepfamily from the perspective of the stepchild is an important endeavor.

Narrative theorizing that focuses on individual storytelling is particularly well-suited to revealing some of the complex processes of stepfamily beginnings. Specifically, research suggests that people tell stories in and about families as a way to make sense of and cope with difficult experiences (e.g., Becker, 1997; Trees & Koenig Kellas, 2009; Weiss, 1975; White, 2007) and as a way to create, reinforce, and communicate individual (McAdams, 1993) and family (Stone, 2004) identity. The stories young adult stepchildren tell about stepfamily beginnings—their family origin stories—thus offer potential insights into how they have made sense of this process and the ways in which the stories might affect and reflect family identity.

The current study, therefore, adopts a narrative perspective for making sense of a potentially difficult family transition by examining the content of stepfamily origin stories that young adult stepchildren tell. In doing so, it adds to the current literature in three primary ways. First, although previous research has examined the development of stepfamilies over time (e.g., Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001), research has yet to carefully examine how the first chapter of the stepfamily life story (McAdams, 1993), or the courtship period, may set the stage for later stepfamily development. Second, and related, the current study draws from narrative theorizing, which situates family stories at the heart of family identity construction. Previous research demonstrates that courtship predicts marital success (see Niehuis, Huston, & Rosenband, 2006 for a review) and that how a couple

constructs its courtship narrative predicts divorce (e.g., Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992). The current study brings together stepfamily development and courtship narrative research by offering an initial glimpse into the narrative construction of *stepfamily courtship from the stepchild's perspective*. It does so by, third, examining the unexplored link between stepfamily origin story content and family satisfaction, thus providing an initial glimpse into the ways in which the stepfamily's first chapter might affect and reflect later stepfamily functioning. In what follows, we first review literature on stepfamily beginnings then turn to literature on family narratives and its implications for satisfaction with the stepfamily.

## Stepfamily Beginnings

Many researchers and clinicians have studied the challenges of stepfamily development in the early years after initial formation. Some have argued that the first four years of development is a "make or break" period for stepfamilies as they cope with unmet expectations of what stepfamily life will be like (Papernow, 1993; Visher & Visher, 1979). All relational subsystems within the stepfamily structure have been examined and found problematic. The remarried couple experiences pressure to devote time to their marriage, yet this is often at the perceived expense of the adults' relationships with the children in the family (Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990). Children often feel that their residential parent has realigned their loyalty to the new spouse, resulting in a coalition that works against the children (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004). The stepparent-stepchild relationship has long been identified as problematic. Stepparents and stepchildren often communicate in ways characterized by conflict, topic avoidance, and indirectness (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000, 2004). Particularly insidious is the belief among stepfamily members that their family is not a "real family," which is often idealized as always communicatively open and conflict-free (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Bryant, 2006).

Despite these struggles, other research suggests that stepfamily development is not universally negative. Stepfamilies develop along different trajectories, with some achieving a strong sense of family identity and others experiencing a declining, stagnating, or unstable sense of family identity (Baxter et al., 1999; Braithwaite et al., 2001). Golish (2003) has found that some stepfamilies are quite resilient, displaying characteristics such as spending quality time together, enacting rituals, and resolving family conflicts through open communication and compromise. Schrodt (2006) has also identified variation in stepfamily experience, with so-called bonded and functional stepfamilies displaying high family involvement, low dissension and avoidance, and high expressiveness and flexibility.

Although this body of research suggests that stepfamily development is complicated, characterized by both triumphs and pitfalls, it tends to focus on stepfamily development over a multiple-year time frame after the stepfamily has begun. In general, the stepfamily development research tends to focus on what happens in a stepfamily after the household has formed, usually through the remarriage event (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Much less is known about how stepfamilies begin—the courtship of the adults, the introduction of children to their prospective stepparent and stepsiblings, the decision to form a stepfamily and the associated practical decisions of setting up a joint household are taken for granted. How a stepfamily begins could be an important harbinger of how it develops, and thus the beginning of the stepfamily

is important to understand in its own right. Yet, only limited research has been conducted on the topic of how stepfamilies begin, and very little of this is from the stepchild's perspective.

Adult courtship is obviously an important component in how a stepfamily begins. Existing research suggests that courtship is short before remarriage, often a year or less (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Kim & McKenry, 2000). In light of the shortness of the courtship period, it is hardly surprising that couples appear to do little to prepare for remarriage (Ganong & Coleman, 1989). The majority of partners appear to fail to talk, either with one another about parenting issues and stepfamily challenges, or with their children about the repartnering and stepfamily decision (Cartwright, 2010). Stepchildren desire greater informational openness with their parent about their dating partners and decisions (Ferguson & Dickson, 1995), yet such relationship talk is often avoided in the postdivorce family (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003). Ganong and Coleman (2004) posit that adult partners may simply be naïve about the challenges of stepfamily life and assume that their couple happiness and excitement will be adequate to see the stepfamily through normal day-to-day problems that could face any family.

Moreover, the point at which a stepfamily forms is not entirely clear; for some, it is the remarriage event, yet many stepfamilies experience cohabitation first and some may define the sharing of a household as the beginning point in the formation of their stepfamily (Baxter et al., 1999; Sweeney, 2010). Little is known about this period of time prior to the remarriage event (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Cohabitation is an even less institutionalized relationship (Cherlin, 1978; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994) than is the married stepfamily in which the parents have the legal institution of marriage upon which to anchor the family unit. Cohabitation, therefore, is ripe with potential for boundary issues of who is and is not a family member, and boundary ambiguity is especially important in its effects on the stepchild's relationship with the stepparent (Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2013; Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright, & Seymour, 2010).

Thus, although understudied, the existing research suggests that stepfamily beginnings may be complicated by a number of factors and may significantly impact the stepchild's experience of the stepfamily over time. Narrative theorizing suggests that the ways in which relationship partners narrate their beginnings has implications for the future of the relationship. Thus, we turn next to narrative theorizing to understand the construction of stepfamily identity through courtship/origin stories and how such stories help to explain current family satisfaction.

### Narrating Stepfamily Beginnings and Family Satisfaction

Becker (1997) argues that society has master scripts about how the life course is idealized to unfold, including the establishment of independence from one's family of origin in young adulthood, getting married and raising children of one's own, and encountering the challenges of the aging body in one's mature years. Unfortunately, according to Becker, few persons experience life in this culturally idealized manner, and instead experience life disruptions of one kind or another—infertility, divorce, the emergence of chronic illness early in one's life, and so forth. Stepfamily formation is a clear departure from the life-course cultural script of traditional family development, and it is often regarded as evidence of "failure, insufficiency, and neglect" (Bernstein, 1999, p. 415). Stories, argue Becker, provide individuals with opportunities to restore order out of the life disruption event, with respect to both psychological well-being and the creation of a legitimate social identity.

A number of narrative theorists support Becker's claim (e.g., Graybeal, Sexton, & Pennebaker, 2002; McAdams, 1993). Stories can help people make sense of their lives because they render logic and sequence out of events that are often messy and complex (see Koenig Kellas, 2008). Research on family stories suggests that stories about the family enable members to make sense of difficulty in the family (e.g., Trees & Koenig Kellas, 2009) and to communicate a sense of individual and family identity (Koenig Kellas, 2005; Stone, 2004).

The identity construction work of narrative is important to understanding stepfamily beginnings. Stone (2004) suggests that families are made up of the stories they tell. Stories, she argues, are ever-present, everlasting, and provide guidelines for understanding family identity, individual identity, and the ways in which family members should interact with the outside world. The discursive practices and content through which we narrate relationships offers a window into family culture. In short, family stories are both prescriptive and reflective constructions that help to structure family life over time.

Origin stories are particularly meaningful in shaping family identity. Previous research supports the notion that origin stories are canonical (e.g., Galvin, 2006). In other words, the story is a cultural prototype for explaining how a family came to be (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillman-Healy, 1997). Origin stories have been studied in the context of courtship and marriage (e.g., Buehlman et al., 1992; Veroff, Sutherland, Chadiha, & Ortega, 1993), the birth of children (e.g., Reese, 1996), and adoption (e.g., creation, adoption, or entrance narratives, Galvin, 2006; Harrigan, 2010; Kranstuber & Koenig Kellas, 2011; Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001). Research on these stories illuminates the ways in which they reflect and affect family culture and satisfaction. Stepfamily origin stories should also provide a window into family culture (Koenig Kellas, 2005), particularly since they shed light on how people make sense of a family beginning, which is situated in the tension between the canonical script of an origin story (Bochner et al., 1997) and the deviation from the master narrative script of how families form (Becker, 1997; Jones, 2003).

Importantly, courtship stories may be a harbinger for future relationship functioning. Researchers employing the oral history interview – a retrospective interview technique in which couples reconstruct the story of how they met, fell in love, and got married – have found that narrative glorification of the struggles of courtship (Buehlman et al., 1992) and of the marital bond (Doohan, Carrère, & Riggs, 2010) are negatively related to divorce and positively related to marital satisfaction, respectively. Further, Horstman (2013) found modest links between young adult children's renditions of their parents' courtship stories and their own relationship schemata. Thus, previous research shows that narratives help to construct relationship identity and that origin stories predict relationship outcomes both within the relationship and for children in the family. Despite this, to date, research has not examined the first chapter/courtship of the stepfamily origin story. Thus, the current study redresses this gap.

Finally, because of the developmental shifts in narrative meaning-making in adolescence and young adulthood (McAdams, 2004), the story of stepfamily origin is likely to be especially salient and important to stepchildren in this age group. However, most of the stepfamily research examines the stepparents' perspective (e.g., Felker, Fromme, Arnaut, & Stoll, 2002; Jones, 2003). Although informative, a dominant focus on stepparent experience has the potential to render a one-sided and parent-centric examination of stepfamily formation and development. To understand stepfamily origin stories from the perspective of the stepchild, we asked:

**RQ: What characterizes the stepfamily origin stories young-adult stepchildren tell?**

Because of their ability to at least partially encapsulate family culture (Fiese & Winter, 2009), family origin stories have also been examined in relation to various markers of family and individual health. For example, the content (Buehlman et al., 1992) and process (Veroff et al., 1993) of marital origin stories predicts relational satisfaction; moreover, the thematic content of adoption entrance narratives has been related to adoptee self-concept (Kranstuber & Koenig Kellas, 2011). Previous research on family stories and family storytelling generally also has identified links between story theme and family satisfaction (e.g., Koenig Kellas, 2005; Vangelisti, Crumley, & Baker, 1999). Family experiences and satisfaction with those experiences shape stories just as stories shape how we experience the reality of family (Stone, 2004).

In sum, family stories both reflect and shape family members' experiences with their family and thus should relate systematically to satisfaction with the family. Origin stories in particular hold importance. Thus, we hypothesized that:

**H: Stepfamily origin story types will account for differences in family satisfaction.**

## Method

### Participants

Participants included 80 individuals, including 28 men and 52 women, recruited from two large Midwestern universities. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, participants whose stepfamilies had formed within the past 10 years were recruited through course announcements as well as snowball and network sampling techniques. They ranged in age from 18 to 30 ($M$ = 21.71, $SD$ = 2.34) and most (96%) reported their ethnicity as Caucasian/White.

### Procedures

After providing informed consent, participants completed a series of demographic and relational quality measures prior to engaging in a semistructured interview designed to elicit stepfamily origin stories.

### *Instrumentation*

First, participants completed a demographic questionnaire as well as a version of the Blended Stepfamily Tree (Baxter et al., 1999). Sixty-three participants reported that one of their biological parents was remarried, and 18 reported that both had remarried. Thus, a majority of participants (77%) reported belonging to one stepfamily.

Next, in order to measure stepfamily satisfaction, participants completed the modified version of Huston, McHale, and Crouter's (1986) Marital Opinion Questionnaire. This scale has been modified for measuring family satisfaction and used reliably across numerous studies on family and stepfamily communication (e.g., Koenig Kellas, 2005; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007; Schrodt, Soliz, & Braithwaite, 2008; Vangelisti et al., 1999). This 11-item measure includes 10, 7-point semantic differential items (e.g., miserable-enjoyable, lonely-friendly) and an eleventh item that assesses the individual's global rating of relational satisfaction (i.e., 1 = completely

satisfied, 7 = completely dissatisfied). Instructions asked participants to report on their satisfaction with their stepfamily.

Participants who had more than one stepfamily were asked to report on the family that they considered the "main" stepfamily (i.e., with whom they spend the most time, residential stepfamily). These were the same families that participants were asked to discuss during the interview process. Six of the 11 items were reverse coded such that higher scores reflect higher levels of family satisfaction. Per Huston et al.'s guidelines, two items that serve as fillers were dropped from the analysis (free-tied down, hard-easy) prior to averaging the remaining eight semantic differential items ($\alpha$ = .95); the average score of these items were then averaged with the 11th item (completely satisfied-completely dissatisfied) to provide an overall stepfamily satisfaction score ($M$ = 4.80, $SD$ = 1.60).

### Stepfamily Origin Story Interview

After completing the demographic and relational satisfaction measures, participants were interviewed by one of four researchers. The interview protocol was part of a larger study on stepfamily beginnings (see Baxter et al., 2009; Koenig Kellas, LeClair-Underberg, & Normand, 2008). The questions relevant to the current study were situated at the beginning of the interview protocol. First, participants were asked to tell the story of how their stepfamily came to be. More specifically, participants were instructed to think of their stepfamily like the chapters of a book (McAdams, 1993), with the story of the stepfamily origin serving as the first chapter. After the participants told their stories, the interviewer asked a series of follow-up questions regarding the emotions participants experienced at the time of the stepfamily formation, their current emotions, their assessment of what the stepfamily beginnings would have been like had it been "ideal" (Vangelisti et al., 1999), and the moral that the participant felt best characterized the origin story. Interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, and, after being transcribed verbatim, resulted in 364 pages of single-spaced text.

Data Analysis

To code the content of stepfamily origin stories, analytic induction (Bulmer, 1979) was employed. Specifically, two members of the research team each read through approximately 50% of the data, including the portion of the interview related to the stepfamily origin story, emotions, ideals, and morals, noting emergent themes and categories (see Koenig Kellas, 2005; Vangelisti et al., 1999 for similar methods). Iteratively, themes in the data were combined into larger categories of coherent clusters, or story types, prior to coding. The unit of analysis for coding purposes was the interview; that is, a given transcript's content was read holistically and it was given a single code that best reflected its overall story type. The researchers met to compare their initial analysis and identify common story types. The initial coding scheme was revised accordingly, creating thematic categories that more fully represented the data. Using the modified coding scheme, the transcripts were read again, using negative case analysis (Bulmer, 1979) to ensure that it accurately represented the data. After finalizing the coding scheme, a number of the stories were coded in common to check for intercoder reliability. We discussed any discrepancies that arose in this initial check for reliability, further clarifying rules for mutually and exclusively coding each story into a single category, and finalized

the coding scheme according to those rules. Following this process, each coder coded 20% of the data in common, resulting in excellent intercoder reliability (story type Cohen's kappa = 1.00). The remaining interviews were then coded. In total, five types of stepfamily origin stories emerged (*Sudden, Dark-sided, Ambivalent, Idealized, and Incremental*). Each type is discussed further in the results.

### Results

Stepfamily Origin Story Types

Research question 1 asked about the thematic content of adult children's stepfamily origin stories. Five thematic clusters were identified—*Sudden, Dark-sided, Ambivalent, Idealized, and Incremental* stepfamily origin story types. The most frequently occurring type was *Sudden*; approximately 28% of all stories were Sudden. Sudden stories were those that characterized the formation of the stepfamily as rushed, spontaneous, and involving little communication. In other words, the main theme of the story was that the marriage of the adults was too quick, secretive, or closed. Stepchildren described that there was too little thought, planning, and/or communication about the couple's courtship and marriage. Some stepchildren focused their stories on how the parents got married too quickly, whereas others focused more on how little involvement and communication surrounded the family's beginning, particularly when it came to including the stepchild participant. A majority of stories focused on both themes. For example, Megan[1] described how disappointed she was in the sudden way her stepfamily began in her origin story:

> Four years ago, my parents got divorced when I was senior in high school, freshman in college type age. Ah, my dad started dating and a family friend introduced him to Caroline who he is now married to. I was living with him and they started dating and it went very quickly, I mean I was living in his place by myself pretty much and she moved in and within, I want to say four months, they got engaged. . . . It was kind of one of those instant deals ah, I wasn't necessarily happy with it. Didn't have much talk in it, didn't have much involvement in his relationship, but he's an adult and he fell in love with her right away so . . . . it's very hard for [my dad] to communicate, so I'll never forget when he came to me to tell me that they were getting married. He came *with* her, who I *barely* knew and sat down and was saying, well she's going to become part of our family. And the first instant I just started crying, I didn't know what else to do because I didn't know *anything* about this lady. I knew nothing about what she did . . . all that kind of stuff. And, and it was becoming you know, she was supposed to be part of our family all of sudden. So, it affected me the most because I was the one that was living [with my dad] . . . . [and] I'm a daddy's girl. . . . I would have liked to have been more involved in, in not only the process but ah as far as getting to know her. Because when they got married I didn't know her. And I didn't *like* her. And so, ah, it does it makes me sad to reflect on it having just the way that things went, you know in the past five years the way things have gone, with my parents and then with this. It's just everything, just yeah it makes me sad, hurtful, you know.

Storytellers, like Megan, lamented being left out of the process of talking about forming a new family. Others discussed the quick and parent-centric nature of the courtship/

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1. All names and some story details have been changed to protect the anonymity of participants.

development. For example, Amanda explained:

> It happened, like, kinda quick for me anyways, where I would want it . . . everything kinda just progressed one right after the other . . . . he moved in and, you know, they, he moved his stuff into their room and, you know, new furniture started appearing, and, new, just new stuff, like, you know, and having his parking spot in the parking lot, and, things like that.

Although these stories were not necessarily wholly negative in nature, the primary theme revolved around the opaque and spontaneous nature of the beginning, as well as the sense that parents – with little consultation from their children – initiated and directed the stepfamily development.

The second most frequently occurring story type was termed *Dark-sided* and accounted for 27% of the stories. Dark-sided stories were those that described stepfamily origins that were overwhelmingly complicated, scandalous, and/or fraught with the "dark side" of interpersonal communication (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Among other things, the dark side metaphor refers to ". . . the manifestly destructive and immoral facets of life" (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007, p. 6). In the current data, dark-sided stepfamily beginnings were generally complicated by things such as, but not limited to, gossip, secrecy, conflict, alcoholism, drug abuse, physical altercations or abuse, "small town" scandals, infidelity, and money problems. For example, when asked to tell the story of her stepfamily beginning, Alexis described how alcohol and conflict characterized its turbulent origin:

> Well, it's really complicated because, um my mother is um, an alcoholic and so is he. . . . So what was happening was, when my mom moved in with him . . . they fought constantly. And so she moved out, and so then, they, they broke up. And then they got back together . . . Like we never talked about it and she knew how I felt about him, because I kind of told her, "this isn't a good situation you are in." And then, then even though my mom's an alcoholic, she functions. So, I mean, she's not like a mean alcoholic, so, um, and he is. So, it's just that their personalities kind of clash, and it's um. But anyway then they were separated for a long time and they got back together. . . . So, they had this complicated relationship in which they were together . . . and then they were apart. Then they were together . . . and then they were apart. And, um, literally it made her a wreck and he's, pardon my French, he's a bastard. I don't like him. And um, so he moved to [other state] and he asked when he moved to [other state], he asked her to marry, or he asked her to, yeah he asked her to marry . . . him and she said, "yes." And then she moved in December, to [other state]. So that's kind of the gist of the whole story. And I told my mother that. She asked me again, how I felt about it and I told her that . . . if she wanted to do that, then she could, but that I would not feel sorry for her when she came running back so. So that's the whole gist of my story.

Alexis clearly disapproved of her stepfather and the beginning of the stepfamily. Other stories similarly reflected family disapproval of the stepparent as pertinent to dark-sided beginnings. For example, Amy's story revolved around family disapproval after her stepmother embezzled from the family business. She concluded her story by saying: "And my grandpa never talks to [my dad], my Aunt lives in the same town and they never talk to [my dad]. And my other Aunt in [city] they all kind of cut ties with my dad just because of her."

Other dark-sided stepfamily origins were clouded by the fact that they grew out of parental infidelity. For example, Brian explained that his stepfamily began with his father's "affair" with his current stepmother:

> I don't know how old I was, my dad starting having an affair with my stepmom, currently. So but that, but she was actually married too at the time. So, ah, so when I was nine my future stepmom, Maureen, she got a transfer, she got transferred to [city]. So my dad put in for a transfer out to [city], out to the [city] office so that he could be with her, yeah. So and he did it, he tried to be all sneaky about it.

Brian goes onto describe the company's and his mother's discovery of the infidelity that resulted in his father being fired from the company, his parents divorcing, and his father marrying Maureen.

Dark-sided stories were also those that recounted multiple divorces. For example, some participants told stories about the multiple times their parents got married and divorced. After explaining a complex series of stepfamily beginnings in which her mother became pregnant out of wedlock and experienced the failure of a relationship with the baby's father, Bobby, then married a third man whom she divorced after three years, Paige explained:

> So she got divorced for the second time, or third time, the marriage, there was a marriage before my dad. And ah, so it was just the three of us again, and suddenly Bobby the father of Caryn wandered back into the picture. . . . When I got back [from overseas] I suddenly find that this man who had left us [all alone] with a child, no way of supporting her, was living in my home and this did not go over well at all. And I fought my mom tooth and nail to have him kicked out; in fact I tried to kick him out personally.

As in Paige's examples, some stepfamily beginnings were re-beginnings that were tainted by previous and pending breakups or divorces.

Approximately 25% of the coded stories were *Ambivalent*, characterized by mixed experiences of ups and downs. In other words, these stories reflect a mix of family highs and lows. For example, some participants talked about how much they liked the beginning of the stepfamily, but also how it was negatively complicated by the family-of-origin (e.g., parents' inability to get along after the divorce). For example, although Carla now calls her stepmom "Mom" and celebrates the fact that her stepmother treats her like her own daughter, the origin of the stepfamily was complicated by her parents' postdivorce relationship:

> Ah, well, my dad and mom don't get along so it was easy for me to go to my dad and my stepmom and tell her the problems that I was having with my mom. Where my mom would always talk down about my dad, "Oh you're just like your dad," and it was kind of disturbing but it didn't cause any you know injury to my head. I was just living in two different worlds where neither of them got along and I'd hear this from my mom, and I'd hear this from dad and it was a little disturbing with them not saying any good things about each other.

Others discussed the ways in which intermittent, sometimes pronounced, conflict interrupted otherwise positive experiences. For example, James described his (well-functioning) stepfamily's origin as complicated by his own "rage" at the divorce and his reoccurring physical fights with his new stepsister. Ultimately, these stories reflected turbulence, balancing benefits and drawbacks to expected and unexpected transitional issues. For example, Amber told a story that she described as "bittersweet" based on the benefits of gaining stepsiblings, but the drawbacks of feeling like she was losing her father in the process:

> It was about five years ago and [my dad] divorced his former wife and is now currently married to my stepmom, now. They live in [other state]. They got married here in [city] and they moved

shortly after and that kind of changed the lifestyle that I had as far my as with my dad. She had two children from a previous marriage who are quite a bit younger than me and my sister. They were three and five at the time and so it was fun to have younger siblings. . . . My sister and I were both part of their wedding and got to go visit quite often . . . . in just five years [they have] grown more as a family and my younger stepsiblings see my dad as their father instead of, they don't call him by his real name. . . . It's currently been kind of bittersweet because ah, in the beginning I guess when he married Trisha the kids were three and five and that's how old my sister and I were when my parents got divorced and felt some ah resent[ment] towards them because he was really trying to be a part of their lives and raise them. And he built this new life in [other state] and at first I didn't really feel a part of that, I guess.

Across the sample, ambivalent stories illustrated the ups and downs of stepfamily beginnings.

*Idealized* stories, accounting for approximately 12% of the data, were those in which participants described a relatively easy transition to becoming a stepfamily. Idealized stories included those in which the primary theme was about feeling like a "real" family. Stepchildren participants described their stepfamily origin without a great deal of complication and at some point in the interview talked about how the family felt like a "real family" or the stepparent treated "me like a son" as in Jake's stepfamily origin story:

Okay, well, my parents got divorced when I was three so it's kind of hard to remember back then but. I do remember I was born in [city A] and I do remember moving from [city A] to [city B] and I got to know Preston, you know we hit it off really well and the last sixteen years he's been pretty much like a dad to me. He had two, he had a daughter and a son. And I had a sister, a half sister. So it was a full house pretty much . . . We moved to [city B], and Preston he took me, around the farm, he was a big farmer so he, you know he treated me like any other son would do just take me around the farm and stuff like that, as far as that goes. Then we moved to a new house in [city B], we got a pool and stuff like that so ah, the four kids all went to the same school, so they would give me a ride to school and stuff like that. And ah, I [used to say] my stepbrother and my stepsister but now I just say they are my sister and my brother, so. There's no disconnection there as far as that goes . . .

Stepfamily origin stories in this category reflected relatively happy, positive beginnings and a sense of "real" family identity. Moreover, when asked how their stepfamilies came to be, adult stepchildren in this category described the sense of friendship that developed well before the stepfamily was legally instituted. For example, one participant said the stepfamily "was born":

Probably like a year before they, um, got married, because they moved in together and then I knew that they were getting engaged, and I knew that they wanted to have another kid. So, that's when [we] started thinking about it. And I would go and visit them, like, every other weekend because I was living with my mom. And me and her [the dad's girlfriend] became really close friends so I started considering her as part of my family.

Idealized families began in ways that were characterized by closeness and friendship.

Finally, a small portion of the sample (6%) described their stepfamily origins through *Incremental* stories. Virtually the opposite of Sudden stories, Incremental stepfamily origin stories were described by participants as organized, planned, and involving open communication. The process of beginning the family, including dating, the decision to get married, etc. was honest and clear with little mystery. For example, Sam appreciated the openness and thoughtfulness that characterized his stepfather and his stepfamily's beginning:

> We actually knew who he was because he was a friend of the family, but we kind of had dinner and he stopped by and sat down . . . He wanted to make sure that he wouldn't take anyone's place. And that, that we were OK with it because if we weren't OK with it, then he wasn't going to pursue, yeah, yeah he wasn't going to do anything without our approval. That's what I think, right there, it showed me that, that you know he was a good guy and they, a lot of people would just, I know other people's parents that just like go for it and they just don't care what kids think. Like this way it made me feel like you know, OK, I could give this guy a shot. He seemed like a good guy.

According to the opinion of stepchild participants, typically the parents had put thought and/or time into a good decision (i.e., creating the stepfamily). For example, the parents may have dated for a long time, lived together, or taken their time in getting married. Children, such as Nicole, were consulted and involved in the process:

> [My mom said] "I want to introduce you to a friend," but I mean, I'm old enough, um like my parents have a really good divorce, [pause] so I really don't care if she dated or "Not if you're happy, I'm fine with it" and I kind of took it like that. And then he sent her flowers and his name just kept coming up over and over so one night I was just like, "What is it, are you a couple?" And she was like, "Well, yeah, I guess." And I said, "OK." And then she went into the whole, "Does that bother you? Are you OK with that? If you don't want me to date, I won't."

Thus, for the most part, stepchildren who told incremental stories described being aware, informed, consulted, and mostly comfortable with the beginning of his or her stepfamily.

### Summary

Considered as a whole, the origin stories told by our sample of young-adult stepchildren were more likely to be negative than positive in tone. The two most frequently occurring story types, Sudden and Dark-sided, account for 55% of the data and were negatively valenced. Stories that were generally positively valenced, Idealized and Incremental, accounted for 18% of the data. The remaining story type, Ambivalent, accounted for a sizeable minority of story types (25%) and displayed a mix of negatively valenced and positively valenced elements.

Origin Story Type and Stepfamily Satisfaction

The hypothesis predicted that individuals who told different types of stepfamily origin stories would vary in stepfamily satisfaction. Results of a one-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect, $F(4, 75) = 4.23$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .18$. Post hoc tests using Tukey's A suggested that participants who told Idealized stories ($M = 5.96$, $SD = .82$) were significantly more satisfied than those who told Sudden stories ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.48$) and those with Dark-sided stories ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.84$). There was also a trend ($p = .056$) for those who told Ambivalent stories ($M = 5.45$, $SD = .82$) to be more satisfied than those who told Dark-sided stories. Hypothesis 1 was thus supported.

## Discussion

The current study set out to examine the content that characterizes young-adult stepchild stories of stepfamily beginnings. It also tested the hypothesis that story type has implications for satisfaction with the stepfamily. Five types of origin stories were identified in the current sample. Moreover, results indicate that, consistent with research on the individual benefits of story framing, story types for stepfamily beginnings predict differences in satisfaction with the family. Implications, limitations, and directions for future research are discussed next.

In the cultural imagination, stepfamily formation symbolizes a negative disruption from normalized life-course development in which adult partners marry for life and raise their children together (Becker, 1997; Bernstein, 1999). Although the origin stories told by the study participants were more likely to be negatively valenced than positively valenced, variation emerged in the type of story that was told. Sudden stories were negatively valenced because of the formation process; stepchildren regarded it as too rushed and insufficiently open and consultative. Most negative were the stories of dark-sided beginnings characterized by dark emotions or elements of the dark side of interpersonal communication (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Undeniable in the narratives coded as Dark-sided was the prevalence of alcoholism, drug, and physical abuse. By contrast, almost a fifth of the stories resisted the negative stereotype of stepfamily formation, offering instead positively toned stories of Idealized and Incremental family beginnings. Furthermore, a fourth of the stories displayed a mix of negatively valenced and positively valenced elements in stepfamily beginning.

The frequency of Sudden stories in the data set supports existing research on stepfamily courtship discussed above. Parents move swiftly to remarriage following divorce and fail to discuss details of the stepfamily formation with their children. As a result, stepchildren experience the beginning of the stepfamily as mysterious or hidden. Ganong, Coleman, and Hans (2006) called for research that empirically tests theoretical conflicts over whether or not rapid remarriage benefits or harms children in stepfamilies.

Although modest, the current study provides initial data to suggest that the narrative reconstruction of sudden stepfamily origins was viewed negatively and linked to lower levels of family satisfaction than families that began according to a more traditional script. There was a clear sense in these stories that stepchildren felt uninformed or left out. Throughout the data, there was also a sense that stepchildren wanted to be included and consulted in the stepfamily's formation. Participants with the Sudden story theme also often lamented how the new relationship with the stepparent took the biological parent's attention away from the child, confirming Cissna et al.'s (1990) characterization of the challenges that occur when the early stages of stepfamily life are perceived as marriage-centered. Many of the stories in the current data set also confirm the parent-centric nature of stepfamily formation in the salience attributed to the marriage, moving in, and/or the parents' relationship. In contrast with sudden stories, a small percentage of our participants told Incremental stories characterized by openness and consultation, thereby fulfilling stepchild desires to be part of the courtship process. Future research needs to attend to factors that contribute to stepfamily beginnings that feature these desired qualities; the current results suggest that stepfamily members could benefit from interventions that facilitate greater openness and attention to all members of the newly forming family unit during the critical courtship stage.

Almost as frequent in our data as Sudden stories were Dark-sided stories, or those in which the couple's courtship and the stepfamily's formation were clouded with dark emotions or elements of the dark side of interpersonal communication (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). One example involved a participant's brother being beaten severely by the stepfather before the mother arrived home, only to blame the abuse – and therefore instigate a social services investigation – on the custodial father.

Although this story represents an extreme example in the data, it was not uncommon for stepchildren to cite alcohol, alcoholism, and abuse, as influential characters in the stories of stepfamily development. The prevalence of these and other dark experiences in stepfamily beginnings may help to explain the development of certain problematic stepfamily types (e.g., conflictual, Schrodt, 2006) and trajectories (e.g., declining, Baxter et al., 1999) across time. They also suggest the need for additional research on the dark side of family communication and its impact on stepfamily formation and well-being (see Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2010). Stepfamilies that face these challenges would obviously benefit from counseling or other intervention programs, and stepchildren who have experienced dark-sided issues could benefit from the narrative therapy practice of reframing and restorying (see White, 2007).

As an exception, and in sharp contrast to a view of the stepfamily beginnings as negative, individuals with Idealized stepfamily beginnings embraced their stepfamily formation, describing an easy and happy transition to feeling like a "real" family. Some participants explained how natural the development was, while others celebrated the opportunity for more family, support, and love. Ironically, Idealized stories function to reinscribe the traditional family unit as the cultural ideal and the dominant discourse that "real" families (i.e., nuclear) are preferable (Baxter et al., 2006; Jones, 2003); these stories were positive because the stepfamily felt like a "real" family rather than praising the stepfamily as a new family form in its own right.

Ambivalent stories, on the other hand, which represented the ups and downs of stepfamily life and challenge an idealized script may confirm Schrodt and Braithwaite's (2010) argument for the functionality of ambivalence in stepfamilies. Specifically, they argue:

> . . . At a minimum, embracing the ambivalence of stepfamily relationships acknowledges the unique challenges associated with stepfamily development, which in turn, allows family members to craft their own relationships independent of the nuclear family model, a model that lacks the flexibility necessary for accommodating the fluid and permeable boundaries of the stepfamily (Gross, 1987) (p. 245).

Those with ambivalent stories in our data paint a clearer picture of what some of those functional ambivalences look like.

Stepfamily beginnings variously described as sudden, dark-sided, ambivalent, idealized, and incremental bear some resemblance to the various trajectories of development during the early years of stepfamily life identified by researchers (e.g., Baxter et al., 1999). This correspondence suggests that how a stepfamily begins might have an important effect on how it subsequently develops. Starting off "on the right foot" thus might be an important component of long-term stepfamily well-being. The findings with respect to satisfaction with the family support this claim in that stepchildren who told Idealized stories were more satisfied than those who told dark-sided or sudden stories. This finding confirms Baxter et al.'s particular finding of the reported happiness of Accelerated families (i.e., those who progressed to feeling like a family quickly). The story of family origin is an important symbol of family identity, and if the

beginning of the stepfamily is problematic in any way, the stepfamily identity may be contaminated as a result (see Buehlman et al., 1992 for a similar phenomenon in marriage). Because the Idealized beginning affirms the family identity as a "real" family, the stepfamily's subsequent development may be framed as "normal," and day-to-day challenges may be understood as characteristic of all families, not just nonnormative stepfamilies.

The current findings can intersect with and build on previous family and stepfamily research. For example, given existing research identifying different stepfamily types, an obvious direction for future research would be to determine if members of these types differ in their origin stories. For example, the Baxter et al.'s (1999) turbulent, stagnating, and declining families likely would not tell stories characterized as Idealized. We might also conduct longitudinal studies of stepfamily origins to assess the progress of family development over the four "make it or break it" years (Papernow, 1993) and/or longitudinal studies that test the effects of interpersonal communication on storytelling over time.

Participants in the study were young-adult college students at the time of their interviews, removed by varying lengths of time from the beginnings of their respective stepfamilies. Future research could productively examine whether the age of the participant, and the duration of time since the stepfamily began, relate in systematic ways to origin story themes. The sample of this study was also disproportionately White and female. Future research should examine stepfamily origins among other populations. For example, Veroff et al. (1993) found differences in the origin stories of Black and White newlyweds and their marital satisfaction.

The current study only collected data from one stepchild per family, and parents were not interviewed. Stepfamily members likely construct the stories of their stepfamily origins differently; thus, it would be interesting to compare different family members on their stories of stepfamily origin to determine the extent to which there is narrative convergence or divergence in constructing the origin story.

We are unable to make conclusions about causality in the current study because of the nonrandom nature of the sample as well as the correlational and retrospective nature of the data. It seems reasonable that current satisfaction with the stepfamily also might affect recollections of how the stepfamily began (Buehlman et al., 1992; Trees & Koenig Kellas, 2009). Thus, stepchildren who currently experience their stepfamily as generally positive might be more likely to recall the beginning as idealized and free of difficulty. At the same time, research on attributions suggests that sense-making predicts satisfaction (e.g., Fincham & Bradbury, 1987) suggesting the need for longitudinal research on the effects of story framing as well. The study's design does not permit us to unravel what is likely a recursive relationship between satisfaction and origin story themes.

However, results do suggest that adult stepchildren frame their stepfamily identity more positively when their stepfamily beginnings were characterized by closeness, friendship, and even expected ups and downs rather than when they were left out of the process of negotiating or forming the stepfamily and when the beginnings were tainted by issues they considered as dark. Thus, stepparents or practitioners may benefit from these findings by examining the means by which stepparents may involve stepchildren in the process of stepfamily courtship, facilitate closeness, and set up realistic expectations for negotiating stepfamily life.

The current study adds to the growing portrait of stepfamily development by focusing on stepfamily beginnings. Further, the study examines the stepchild perspective, thereby offsetting the parent-centric bias in existing stepfamily development research. Results suggest that the majority of stepchildren frame the beginning of their stepfamily in negatively valenced

ways that relate systematically to their current satisfaction with the stepfamily. However, some stepchildren constructed more positively valenced origin stories, and the obvious next step for researchers is to probe why some stepfamily origin stories are more positive than others.

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