# University of Nebraska - Lincoln DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Papers in Communication Studies

Communication Studies, Department of

6-2008

# A Social Relations Model of Everyday Talk and Relational Satisfaction in Stepfamilies

Paul Schrodt *Texas Christian University*, p.schrodt@tcu.edu

Jordan Soliz University of Nebraska-Lincoln, jsoliz2@unl.edu

Dawn O. Braithwaite University of Nebraska–Lincoln, dbraithwaite1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/commstudiespapers Part of the <u>Critical and Cultural Studies Commons, Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in</u> <u>Communication Commons</u>, and the <u>Other Communication Commons</u>

Schrodt, Paul; Soliz, Jordan; and Braithwaite, Dawn O., "A Social Relations Model of Everyday Talk and Relational Satisfaction in Stepfamilies" (2008). *Papers in Communication Studies*. 89. http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/commstudiespapers/89

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Communication Studies, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Papers in Communication Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Published in *Communication Monographs* 75:2 (June 2008), pp 190–217. doi:10.1080/03637750802023163 Copyright © 2008 National Communication Association; published by Routledge. Used by permission.



# A Social Relations Model of Everyday Talk and Relational Satisfaction in Stepfamilies

# Paul Schrodt, Jordan Soliz, and Dawn O. Braithwaite

**Paul Schrodt** (PhD, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, 2003) is an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at Texas Christian University.

Jordan Soliz (PhD, University of Kansas, 2004) is an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

**Dawn O. Braithwaite** (PhD, University of Minnesota, 1988) is Willa Cather Professor and Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

Corresponding author — Paul Schrodt, Department of Communication Studies, Texas Christian University, PO Box 298045, Fort Worth, TX 76129, USA; email p.schrodt@tcu.edu

#### Abstract

This study examined the intrapersonal and interpersonal mechanisms underlying reported frequencies of everyday talk and relational satisfaction in stepfamilies. Participants included a parent, stepparent, and child from 114 stepfamilies (N = 342) from the Midwest and Southwest regions of the United States. Social relations model analyses revealed that everyday talk and relational satisfaction vary across stepfamily relationships as a function primarily of actor and relationship effects. Stepparents' reports of everyday talk with the parent (i.e., their spouse) varied primarily as a function of actor effects, whereas reports of both children's and parents' satisfaction with the stepparent varied primarily as a function of relationship effects. Dyadic reciprocity emerged in the stepparent/stepchild relationship for reports of both everyday talk and satisfaction. Finally, stepparents engaging in everyday talk more frequently with stepchildren were more likely to be satisfied with stepchildren, and were more likely to have stepchildren reporting satisfaction with them, than stepparents engaging less frequently in everyday talk.

**Keywords:** Everyday Talk, Relational Satisfaction, Stepfamilies, Stepparents, Social Relations Model, Actor Effects, Partner Effects, Relationship Effects

Over the last two decades, family scholars have given increased attention to the central role that communication plays in facilitating family functioning. For example, Olson's (2000) circumplex model views family communication as the dynamic component that

aids or hinders family movement along dimensions of cohesion and flexibility. Family therapists and social workers have identified certain communication behaviors that build family strengths (Cook & DeFrain, 2005; Marsh, 2003; Walsh, 1998). Likewise, Koerner and Fitzpatrick's (2002a, 2002b) research has culminated into a general theory of family communication, one that positions family functioning as an outgrowth of familial and relational schemas that guide social interactions in, and outside of, the family. Inherent in each of these programs of research is not only a commitment to further the well-being of individual family members, but more specifically, to identify and document the nature and prevalence of specific communication behaviors and processes that differentiate strong families from those functioning less well.

Concurrent with a more general focus on communication behaviors that aid healthy family processes is a similar interest among interpersonal scholars in the everyday interactions that create, maintain, and alter personal relationships (e.g., Baxter, 2004; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Duck, Rutt, Hurst, & Strejc, 1991; Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996; Tracy, 2002). Defined as recurring patterns of speech events that communicatively embody or enact personal relationships (Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996), everyday talk consists of the seemingly mundane conversations that occur among relational partners. Examining everyday talk in familial relationships enables scholars to focus on communication as the primary means by which family members shape personal identities (cf. Tracy, 2002) and build, enact, and transform family relationships (Baxter, 2004). Despite the heuristic value of this research, however, most scholars studying everyday talk do so at the level of dyadic romantic relationships (Baxter, 1996), and/or without considering the impact such talk may have in facilitating healthy, more satisfying family relationships.

The present study examined patterns of everyday talk in stepfamily relationships and how such patterns of talk contribute to relational satisfaction among stepfamily members. The stepfamily has captured the attention of social scientists due, in part, to the challenges associated with adjustment to postdivorce and remarried family life (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Ganong & Coleman, 1994, 2004; Schrodt, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c). As Golish (2003) noted, strong stepfamilies can be differentiated from struggling stepfamilies on the basis of communication strengths, and one of the strengths identified in her research is everyday talk. As such, the stepfamily provides an ideal family context for examining the patterns of everyday talk that characterize postdivorce and remarried family relationships. Although family scholars have begun to untangle the message behaviors that facilitate healthy stepfamily functioning (e.g., Afifi, 2003; Afifi & Schrodt, 2003a, 2003b; Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990; Golish, 2003; Schrodt, 2006c), in general, "most of what we know about communication in stepfamilies comes from studies that were not specifically designed to investigate communication patterns" (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2004, p. 227). Consequently, in the present study, social relations modeling was employed to examine the unique and combined sources of variation in patterns of everyday talk and reports of relational satisfaction in stepfamily systems.

#### **Theoretical Perspective**

A family systems perspective was adopted in the present study in order to move beyond a focus on individual acts to examine patterns of talk that occur among a web of stepfamily relationships (Galvin, Dickson, & Marrow, 2006; von Bertalanffy, 1968). Family systems theory focuses primarily on the holistic nature of interaction patterns. As such, system theorists have identified seven key characteristics or tenets that characterize family systems (for a detailed review, see Galvin et al., 2006). Although addressing all seven tenets lies well beyond the scope of the present study, three key principles guided this investigation of the interrelationships among members of the stepfamily triad.

First, system elements are interconnected and thus, interdependence implies that the family operates as a highly connected web of personal relationships where each family member depends on every other family member to sustain the family system. Accordingly, the present investigation sought to further an understanding of stepfamily systems by examining the various and complex ways in which interpersonal communication (e.g., everyday talk) influences relational satisfaction with different members of the stepfamily household. Second, system theorists stress wholeness, or the notion that what emerges out of a family system is greater than the sum of the characteristics of its individual family members. As Galvin et al. (2006) noted, distinctive communication patterns between and among different family members emerge as a result of wholeness. Finally, family systems theory focuses on complex relationships. Each family is organized into numerous interpersonal subsystems (e.g., mother-son, husbandwife, brother-sister, etc.), as well as the interpersonal dynamics between or among them (Galvin et al., 2006). Consequently, this principle further emphasizes the need for family scholars to account for the triangulation and loyalty divides that so often characterize postdivorce families and stepfamilies (e.g., Afifi, 2003; Afifi & Schrodt, 2003a; Amato & Afifi, 2006; Baxter, Braithwaite, & Bryant, 2006).

It is this final principle of systems theory, or that of alliances, that is particularly enlightening when appropriated to the stepfamily context. For example, Bowen's (1976) family systems theory identifies the triangle as the fundamental building block of any system. According to Bowen's work, anxiety or tension within a twosome leads the most uncomfortable partner to recruit a third family member to help dispel the tension. Take, for example, recent empirical evidence documenting children's feelings of being caught between parents in stepfamilies (i.e., Afifi, 2003; Afifi & Schrodt, 2003a; Amato & Afifi, 2006; Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). One of the conclusions drawn from this work is that despite similarities in the processes that foster triangulation, children from postdivorce families (including stepfamilies) continue to report higher levels of feeling caught than children in first-marriage families (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007; Schrodt & Ledbetter, 2007).

One triangle that has received less attention from stepfamily researchers thus far is the parent-stepparent-child triangle (for notable exceptions, see Baxter et al., 2006;

Golish, 2003), which in many ways constitutes the fundamental building block of a stepfamily system. Inherent in this triangle are the tensions that emerge as a function of balancing a preexisting parent/child relationship with the remarriage relationship, as well as the ambiguities surrounding the role of the stepparent in the stepparent/ stepchild relationship (Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998; Schrodt, 2006b). For example, Cissna and his colleagues (1990) argued that one of the primary developmental tasks facing remarried couples is to present a unified front to the children. This, of course, implies a certain degree of parental authority granted to the stepparent. As Coleman, Ganong, Fine, Downs, and Pauk (2001) reported, however, some residential parents adopt a "guard and protect" ideology with respect to children, in essence, positioning themselves as the sole disciplinarian for children and relegating new spouses to a role less than that of a "parent."

In addition, stepchildren have reported mixed views concerning the role of the stepparent and how this role influences communication patterns within the stepfamily. Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, and Wagner (2004) found that stepchildren feel tremendous ambivalence about stepparents, often experiencing the dialectical tensions of wanting both a two-parent authority system and a one-parent authority system in the stepfamily. Indeed, the basic question facing most stepfamilies concerns whether or not the stepparent should have an active or inactive role in the stepchildren's lives (Fine et al., 1998). Given considerable variability in stepparent role expectations and enactments (Fine et al., 1998), as well as tremendous variability in parent–child relationships and remarried adult relationships in stepfamilies, one might suspect that patterns of everyday talk and feelings of relational satisfaction in stepfamily relationships vary.

# Everyday Talk and Relational Satisfaction

In addition to family systems theory, previous research on everyday talk in personal relationships also informed the framework for the present investigation. In particular, Duck et al. (1991) and Goldsmith and Baxter (1996) each provided sizable contributions to understanding the types and frequencies of everyday talk that distinguish different types of personal relationships. For example, Duck et al. found that the predominant form of communication in intimate relationships is not only nonintimate, but is rather nondistinguishable from communication in other relationship types. Likewise, Goldsmith and Baxter focused on the everyday speech events that occur in personal relationships. These researchers developed a taxonomy of interpersonal speech events that provides a communication-based vocabulary for describing different types of relationships. Such speech events ranged from informal, trivial forms of talk such as gossip and small talk, to more formal, goal-oriented types of talk including persuasion, decision making, lecturing, and interrogation, to positive, relational maintenance types of talk including relationship talk, love talk, and reminiscing, among others. Across several types of relationships (e.g., friends, romantic partners, family members, etc.) and various forms of everyday talk (e.g., formal and informal, goal directed and trivial), Goldsmith and Baxter found that most of the everyday interactions that people report consist of informal

types of talk, including *gossip*, *joking around*, *catching up*, and *recapping the day's events*.

Despite the heuristic value of previous research, to date, researchers have not explored variation in the patterns of everyday talk that characterize stepfamily relationships at the systems level of analysis. There is, however, preliminary evidence to warrant the study of everyday talk in stepfamilies. For instance, Golish (2003) identified everyday talk as one communication strength that distinguished strong stepfamilies from those struggling with stepfamily functioning, while Schrodt (2006c) described five different types of stepfamilies that varied in stepchildren's reports of communication competence and mental health. What remains unanswered from these lines of research are the specific sources of variability in everyday conversation that occur within the stepfamily system. Based on this line of reasoning, then, the first research question was advanced for consideration:

RQ1: To what extent is everyday talk in parent/stepparent/child triads dispositional (i.e., a function of individual stepfamily members), relational (i.e., a function of the unique relationship between two stepfamily members), or both?

A second, but equally important goal of this investigation was to examine the extent to which relational satisfaction in stepfamily relationships varies as a function of everyday conversations. To date, most of the communication research on relational satisfaction has focused primarily on romantic and married couples (e.g., Caughlin, 2002; Caughlin & Huston, 2002; Caughlin, Huston, & Houts, 2000; Miller, Caughlin, & Huston, 2003), parent-child relationships (e.g., Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Caughlin & Golish, 2002; Sillars, Koerner, & Fitzpatrick, 2005), and general family satisfaction (e.g., Caughlin, 2003). There is, however, more recent evidence documenting various associations among disclosure patterns and relational satisfaction in first-marriage families (e.g., Finkenauer, Engels, Branje, & Meeus, 2004). Using a social relations model, Finkenauer et al. (2004) found that disclosure was more important to satisfaction in horizontal family relationships (e.g., spousal and sibling dyads) than in vertical ones (e.g., father-son, mother-daughter dyads). Likewise, relationship-specific disclosure was more important to satisfaction than dispositional disclosure. Although disclosure represents a more specific theoretical construct in scope than everyday talk, Finkenauer et al.'s research provides indirect evidence to suggest that the association between communication and satisfaction in families varies as a function of both relationship-specific and dispositional characteristics of individual family members. Moreover, communication quality and quantity indicators have been linked to relationship satisfaction (e.g., Emmers-Sommer, 2004), and thus, continued research delineating the communication patterns that foster healthy personal relationships and satisfaction in family relationships appears warranted.

In stepfamilies, earlier reports noted that satisfaction in new stepfamilies is often based on open communication (Peek, Bell, Waldren, & Sorrell, 1988). For remarried couples, relational satisfaction in new stepfamilies is typically based on the interpersonal communication skills of spouses (Beaudry, Boisvert, Simard, Parent, & Blais, 2004), although for stepparents, the quality of relationships with stepchildren often emerges as most central to relational and familial satisfaction. For stepchildren, Afifi and Schrodt (2003a) found that children's feelings of being caught between parents mediated the impact of divorce on relational satisfaction with parents. Consequently, while competent interpersonal communication facilitates relational satisfaction across numerous relationship types, including stepfamily relationships, researchers have yet to consider the sources of variation in relational satisfaction among stepfamily members, as well as how satisfaction varies as a function of everyday talk in the parent/stepparent/child stepfamily triad. To explore these issues, two more research questions were advanced:

- RQ2: To what extent is relational satisfaction in parent/stepparent/child triads dispositional (i.e., a function of individual stepfamily members), relational (i.e., a function of the unique relationship between two stepfamily members), or both?
- RQ3: How does relational satisfaction in the parent/stepparent/child triad vary as a function of everyday talk?

## A Social Relations Model of Everyday Talk and Relational Satisfaction in Stepfamilies

According to systems theory, family members continuously influence each other, and thus, the study of everyday talk and relational satisfaction in stepfamilies poses a challenge for researchers. How can researchers examine everyday talk and relational satisfaction when stepfamily members coordinate thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and when these patterns of interdependence are of fundamental importance to understanding such phenomena (Finkenauer et al., 2004; Kashy, Jellison, & Kenny, 2004; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006)? Historically, researchers have relied primarily on statistical analyses that require independence of observations, yet this tendency becomes problematic when one is interested in understanding holistic patterns of interaction among dyads, triads, or larger family groups. Fortunately, the social relations model offers one solution to this dilemma (e.g., Cook, 1994; Kenny et al., 2006; Kenny & La Voie, 1984).

The social relations model (SRM) is a method used to identify the sources of variance within a group, which in the present study involved using the SRM with distinguishable roles to analyze the parent/stepparent/child stepfamily triad (Kenny et al., 2006). As such, the stepfamily is the unit of analysis and the behaviors/ratings of each stepfamily member are analyzed according to roles in the group. In the present study, each stepfamily member reported frequencies of everyday talk, as well as ratings of relational satisfaction, with the other two members of the stepfamily triad (see Figure 1). The SRM then identified that part of the variance in everyday talk that is due to (a) *actor effects*, or a stepfamily member's general disposition to engage in everyday talk across stepfamily relationships, (b) *partner effects*, or a stepfamily member's general tendency to elicit everyday talk across stepfamily relationships, and (c) *relationship effects*, which represent the extent to which a stepfamily member has everyday conversations with one specific partner, but not with others. Although the present study focused on stepfamily triads, SRM analyses that include at least four people per family also permit the



**Figure 1.** SRM of everyday talk in stepfamily triads (*N*=114 stepfamilies). Ch=Child; Par=Parent; SP=Stepparent; Ta=Everyday talk; REL=Relationship factor. Split half scales were used for each family member's reports of everyday talk with other family members (e.g., "Ch Ta Par 1" and "Ch Ta Par 2" for child everyday talk with parent). Factor loadings were all fixed at 1.0 in order to estimate variances for each latent construct. The same model depicted here was estimated for relational satisfaction, and both models (i.e., everyday talk and satisfaction) were estimated simultaneously.

estimation of a *family effect* (e.g., the extent to which a stepfamily as a group engages in more everyday talk than other stepfamilies). However, only actor, partner, and relationship effects can be estimated and included in a three-person SRM design (though there are some exceptions; see Kenny et al., 2006). Thus, in the present study, an actor effect for the child would specify how talkative or how satisfied he or she tends to be as an individual, whereas a partner effect would specify how much talk or how much satisfaction the child elicits in general across all stepfamily relationships. If the variance of the child actor or partner effect in the SRM reaches a level of statistical significance, then it is reasonable to conclude that children's dispositional tendencies to either engage in, or to elicit, everyday talk varies across stepfamilies.

Relational variance, on the other hand, is the variance in everyday talk (or relational satisfaction) unique to a particular actor–partner relationship. That is, relationship variance accounts for the portion of variance in everyday conversations (or satisfaction) that is unique to relational factors, after controlling for any variance that is attributable to actor and partner effects (Kenny et al., 2006). The relationship effect occurs at the dyad level and reflects the unique combination of two individuals after removing individual-level tendencies. Thus, it is by definition an *interpersonal* effect that accounts for the unique communication patterns that have emerged as part of the relationship between two family members. The relationship effect is also directional in the sense that,

for example, a stepchild's level of everyday talk with his/her stepparent need not necessarily equal the stepparent's unique level of everyday talk with the same stepchild.

In addition to partitioning variance into individual, relational, and group effects, the SRM permits estimation of both generalized and dyadic reciprocity (Kenny et al., 2006). Generalized reciprocity (or individual reciprocity) is measured by the correlation between a person's actor effect and that person's partner effect. In the present study, generalized reciprocity estimates would reveal, for example, the extent to which a stepfamily member engaged in increased frequencies of everyday talk elicited increased levels of everyday talk from other stepfamily members. Dyadic reciprocity, on the other hand, is measured by the correlation between the two relationship effects that represent the two sides of a given relationship (Kenny et al., 2006). Again, in the present study, dyadic reciprocity estimates of everyday talk for stepparents and stepchildren would reveal whether or not stepparents engaging in more everyday talk with stepchildren have stepchildren engaging more in everyday talk with them, independent of the more general characteristics of stepparents or stepchildren as individual actors and partners. Consequently, both generalized and dyadic reciprocity estimates represent measures of dynamic feedback processes, with one occurring at the intrapersonal level, and the other occurring at the interpersonal level of analysis.

Overall, then, the primary purpose of this investigation was to examine the individual and relational sources of variation in patterns of everyday talk and relational satisfaction among stepfamily triads using the SRM (see Figure 1). This study also examined both the intrapersonal and interpersonal mechanisms underlying such relational processes in an effort to add to theoretical understandings of how communication impacts relational satisfaction in the stepfamily (see Figure 2).

### Method

#### Participants

To gather multiple perspectives on everyday talk and satisfaction in stepfamilies, a stepchild, stepparent, and parent from the same stepfamily were surveyed. A total of 114 adult stepchildren (ages 18–41, M=22.2, SD=3.4), 114 stepparents (ages 20–69, M=48.9, SD=7.8), and 114 parents (ages 34–69, M=48.6, SD=5.8) participated in the study (N=342). The majority of participants were Caucasian (83.6%, n=286) and from either the Midwestern (n=195, 65 stepfamilies) or Southwestern (n=147, 49 stepfamilies) regions of the United States. Stepchildren included 39 males and 75 females who reported growing up primarily in mother and stepfather households (57%), though 14 (12.3%) grew up in father and stepmother households and 13 (11.4%) grew up with their biological mothers. The majority of stepchildren had biological parents who were divorced (93%) and living (90.4%), as well as a parent and a stepparent and stepparent who were remarried (86%), though 11 (9.6%) stepchildren reported having a parent and stepparent who cohabitated. For those stepchildren whose parents divorced, the length of time



Figure 2. SRM correlations between everyday talk and relational satisfaction.

since the divorce ranged from 4 years to 29 years (M=15, SD=5.5). The frequency with which stepchildren visited their nonresidential parents ranged from never (16.7%) to daily (1.8%), though the majority reported visiting once a month or less (37.7%), more than once a month but no more than once a week (29.6%), or more than once a week but less than daily (11.3%).

199

Stepparents included 83 stepfathers and 31 stepmothers, the majority of whom were remarried (89.5%) and had been previously divorced once (75.4%), though four (3.5%) had never been divorced, 15 (13.2%) had been divorced twice, and two (1.8%) had been divorced three times. Parents included 29 fathers and 85 mothers, the majority of whom were remarried (88.6%) and had been previously divorced once (69.3%), though 21 (18.4%) had been divorced twice and three (2.6%) had been divorced three times.

For stepparents, the highest level of education completed ranged from some high school (1.8%) to a PhD (7.0%), though the majority had completed some college (35.1%), a bachelor's degree (22.8%), or a high school diploma (21.1%). For parents, the highest level of education completed ranged from some high school (3.5%) to a PhD (5.3%), though the majority had completed some college (34.2%), a bachelor's degree (24.6%), or a high school diploma (19.3%). Both parents and stepparents reported combined house-hold incomes that were distributed fairly evenly and ranged from less than \$30,000 a year to more than \$100,000 a year, though the sample was somewhat affluent with 28.9% of the adults reporting combined household incomes in excess of \$100,000 a year. The average length of stepfamily formation ranged from six months to 27 years (M=10.5 years, SD=6.1).

# Procedures

The data were collected using purposive and network sampling techniques. First, the researchers entered classes at two large universities in the Midwest and Southwest, and solicited direct participation from a variety of young adult stepchildren. In order to qualify for participation, participants were told that they must be a member of a stepfamily. For those who remained unsure, additional instructions stated that they must "be a member of a family in which your biological (or adoptive) parents are no longer together, and at least one of your parents has a new relational partner that you would think of as a stepparent." Participants were also invited to recruit their parents and stepparents for participation in the research. All participants completed the questionnaire on a volunteer basis, and in classes where instructors granted permission, students were awarded minimal class credit (less than 2%) for completing the questionnaire and for returning completed questionnaires from other members of their stepfamily.

Second, students not qualifying as members of a stepfamily, as well as faculty members, friends, and fellow community members, identified additional participants meeting the criteria for inclusion and willing to complete a questionnaire. Participants provided a phone number at the bottom of the consent form to verify participation, and returned questionnaires to the researchers in sealed envelopes so as to protect confidentiality. To verify participation of those respondents completing questionnaires through the network sampling procedures (n=248), a research assistant randomly called 25% of the respondents to verify that they had indeed participated in the study and completed the questionnaire. All 62 respondents verified participation. Participants completed a questionnaire that included several demographic questions, 20 items representing the different types of everyday talk identified by Goldsmith and Baxter (1996), and a modified version of the Marital Opinion Questionnaire (Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986) to assess relational satisfaction.

#### Measures

Everyday talk. Frequencies of everyday talk among stepfamily members were operationalized using Goldsmith and Baxter's (1996) Revised Taxonomy of Interpersonal Speech Events. Specifically, separate behavioral indices were created for each type of everyday talk that could theoretically characterize stepfamily interaction (including both children and adults, e.g., small talk, catching up, decision-making, love talk, relationship talk, etc.; see Schrodt et al., 2007). This decision excluded certain types of everyday talk considered less relevant for the present study (e.g., class information talk, asking someone out, etc.). Each member of the stepfamily triad reported frequencies of everyday talk for every other member of the stepfamily system. For stepchildren, directions asked participants to indicate how frequently, during a typical week, they engaged in different kinds of talk with residential parents (i.e., "the parent with whom you lived or are currently living with") and stepparents. Directions were then modified for adult members of the stepfamily system, alternating the target relationships for whom frequencies of everyday talk were reported. Responses were solicited using a five-point, Likert-type scale ranging from 1="never" to 5="regularly". The 20-item inventory demonstrated strong reliability overall, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .86 and .91 for children's reports of talk with parents and stepparents respectively, .88 and .85 for parents' reports of talk with children and stepparents respectively, and .92 and .82 for stepparents' reports of talk with stepchildren and parents respectively.

Relational satisfaction. Relational satisfaction for stepfamily members was operationalized using a modified version of the Marital Opinion Questionnaire (Huston et al., 1986). The scale consisted of 10 items measuring satisfaction with seven-point semantic differential scales (e.g., "miserable-enjoyable") and an additional global satisfaction item that ranged from 1="completely dissatisfied" to 7="completely satisfied". Participants were asked to report satisfaction with each member of the stepfamily system over the last month, with the instrument adjusted to reflect a stepchild (or child), stepparent (or spouse), or parent (or spouse) as the referent. Final scores were calculated for each stepfamily member's reports of relational satisfaction with the other members of the family by averaging items. Previous studies have demonstrated the validity and reliability of using the modified version to measure both relational and familial satisfaction (e.g., Afifi & Schrodt, 2003a; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). In this study, the 11-item measure produced strong reliability with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .95 and .96 for children's reports of satisfaction with parents and stepparents respectively, .96 and .91 for parents' reports of satisfaction with stepparents and children respectively, and .96 for stepparents' reports of satisfaction with both parents (i.e., spouses) and (step)children.

#### Data Analysis

Social relations modeling (SRM; Kenny et al., 2006) was performed on the 2–3 covariance matrix of each stepfamily member's everyday talk to, and relational satisfaction with, the other two family members. This analysis examines the extent to which variance in everyday talk and relational satisfaction in each of the six stepfamily relationships is due to actor, partner, and relationship effects. All effects (i.e., actor, partner, and relationship effect) were estimated separately after controlling for all other effects. The different variances for everyday talk and satisfaction were simultaneously estimated using structural equation modeling (SEM) with maximum likelihood (ML) estimation procedures in LISREL 8.80. Missing data (less than 2.5%) were imputed using the EM imputation algorithm in SPSS prior to data analysis. This approach to missing data yields both greater power and decreased potential for bias than traditional methods that rely on removing incomplete cases (West, 2001).

For a three-person stepfamily, there are six unidirectional indicators of everyday talk and six unidirectional indicators of satisfaction. In studies that employ a single measure of a given construct, relationship effects are confounded with error, and thus, to separate relationship effects from error variances, we treated split half scales of talk and satisfaction as separate indicators (cf. Kashy et al., 2004; Kenny et al., 2006). This decision produced 12 observed scores (or frequencies) of everyday talk and 12 of satisfaction (6 relationships × 2 scales; cf. Branje, van Lieshout, & van Aken, 2005; Finkenauer et al., 2004). A single social relations model analysis was then conducted to partition the variance in everyday talk and satisfaction into actor, partner, and relationship effects for each latent construct, respectively (see Figure 1). Although previous researchers using SRM typically allow for correlations among measurement errors for each indicator per rating family member (i.e., Branje et al., 2005; Finkenauer et al., 2004), doing so in the present study would generate a greater number of parameter estimates than those afforded by the sample size, thus producing potentially unreliable parameter estimates. Therefore, the initial model was estimated without any correlations among measurement errors and then modification indices were examined to determine if correlation estimates among measurement errors were needed.

The actor, partner, and relationship effects technically constitute separate factors within a confirmatory factor analysis (Finkenauer et al., 2004; Kenny et al., 2006). The factor loadings were all fixed to 1.0 and the variances were then estimated. In the same model, generalized and dyadic reciprocity effects (i.e., the correlations) between the social relations components of everyday talk and satisfaction were also estimated (see Figure 2).

Model fit was evaluated with the maximum likelihood chi-squared statistic. Due to sensitivity of large sample sizes in the chi-squared statistic, the nonnormed fit index (NNFI), comparative fit index (CFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RM-SEA) were also examined to assess model fit. Values greater than .90 for the NNFI and CFI may indicate reasonably good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999), whereas RMSEA estimates less than .05 indicate close model fit, values between .05 and .08 suggest reasonable

fit, and values greater than .10 suggest poor fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). Given that variance is, by definition, nonnegative, one-tailed significance tests were used to determine if a specific variance component was reliable (Kenny et al., 2006). For all other remaining components in the model, two-tailed tests were used with the significance level set at p<.05.

## Results

Descriptive statistics for all indicators of everyday talk and relational satisfaction, including means, standard deviations, and Pearson product-moment correlations, are presented in Table 1.

The social relations model showed a reasonable fit to the data,  $\chi^2(216, N=114) =$ 344.83, p<.01, NNFI=0.94, CFI=0.95, RMSEA=.066, with a 90% confidence interval of .051-.081. An examination of the modification indices revealed a number of correlated residual error terms that, if freely estimated, would improve model fit. Given the sample size, the analysis proceeded with an iterative process of modifying the more conservative SRM above by correlating each measurement error that produced the next highest modification index. This process resulted in the estimation of nine correlated residual error terms that produced a significant improvement in model fit, Dx2(9)=55.08, pB.05. The revised SRM showed a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(207, N=114)=289.75$ , p<.01, NNFI=0.96, CFI=0.97, RMSEA=.053, with a 90% confidence interval of .034-.070. Finally, for the sake of comparison, an SRM allowing for all correlations among measurement errors for each indicator per rating family member was estimated (cf., Branje et al., 2005; Finkenauer et al., 2004) and then compared against the modified SRM. The modified SRM did not evidence a significantly worse model fit than the full (though potentially unstable) SRM will all correlated residual error terms freely estimated,  $\Delta \chi^2(51)=69.32$ , p>.05. Thus, all remaining analyses of variance, SRM components, and reciprocity estimates were based on the modified SRM.

Is Everyday Talk in Parent/Stepparent/Child Triads Dispositional, Relational, or Both (RQ1)?

Table 2 shows that all actor effects for talk were significant, confirming that everyday talk in stepfamilies varies as a function of each stepfamily member's disposition to engage in conversation. These results suggest that individual stepfamily members differed in their dispositions to engage in everyday talk with other family members across all 114 stepfamilies. Some stepfamily members tend to converse more often with other stepfamily members, and others are less likely to engage in everyday talk, regardless of their particular role in the stepfamily. In addition, almost all of the relationship effects were significant, indicating that the extent to which one stepfamily member converses with another depends on the unique relationship between those two stepfamily members in a specific stepfamily. The only exception to this trend was the nonsignificant (and therefore unreliable) relationship variance in the stepparent's reports of everyday

Table 1. Descr	iptive	Statis	tics a	nd C	orrel	ations	s for a	ll Indi	cators	of Ev	reryd	ay Ta	lk and	d Relâ	ational	Satis	factio	Z Z	114 ste	epfam	ilies)			
Rater to target	M S.	D	1	2	3	4	5	9	7 8	6	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
1. C to P Talk 1	3.34	- 63 -	1																					
2. C to P Talk 2	3.34	.57	.87**	I																				
3. C to S Talk 1	2.58	.73	.38**	.34*																				
4. C to S Talk 2	2.56	.67	.38**	.41*	* .90*	*	Ι																	
5. P to C Talk 1	3.22	.62	.38**	.32*	* .19*	.15	I																	
6. P to C Talk 2	3.23	.54	.41**	.36*	* .14	.12	.80**	*																
7. P to S Talk 1	3.63	.59	.19*	.11	.16	.08	.45**	.47**.	I															
8. P to S Talk 2	3.41	.49	.17	.07	.14	.11	.39**	.52**	- **08.															
9. S to C Talk 1	2.76	.65	.07	.07	.43*	* .38*	* .23*	.19*	.05	.13 –														
10. S to C Talk 2	2.78	.65	00.	01	.43*	* .35*	* .18	.16	.03	.12	- **16.													
11. S to P Talk 1	3.73	.52	.06	.06	.22*	.19*	.01	60.	.32**	.32**	.53**	.46** –												
12. S to P Talk 2	3.54	.47	.11	60.	.29*	* .22*	.04	.10	.29**	.33**	.46**	.47**	- **97.											
13. C to P Sat 1	5.67	1.07	.33**	.16	.05	.02	.16	.07	.05	.07	.02	- 40.	.06	.02 *										
14. C to P Sat 2	5.81	1.12	.31**	.14	.05	.01	.22*	.12	.03	.05	.04	- 70.	.08	.01	.91** –									
15. C to S Sat 1	5.08	1.30	04	14	.38*	* .26*	* .08	00.	.04	.13	.32**	.34**	.12	.13	.27** .2	- 1*								
16. C to S Sat 2	5.12	1.31	.01	07	.38*	* .29*	* .13	.08	.03	.14	.35**	.35**	.12	.15	.25** .2	24* .9	3** –							
17. P to C Sat 1	6.03	.92	.16	.04	.16	.08	.37**	.24*	.11	.03	.12	.17 -	.08	.01	.37** .3	39** .2	6** .2	]* –						
18. P to C Sat 2	6.19	1.03	.29**	.17	.28*	* .21*	.45**	.35**	.16	.07	.15	.18	.04	10.	.36** .3	39** .2	5** .2	38.	- **					
19. P to S Sat 1	5.78	1.33	.15	.06	.20*	.11	.24*	.23*	.49**	.43**	.16	.19*	.30**	35**	.04	). (	8.0	96.	)** .35	 **				
20. P to S Sat 2	5.85	1.41	.15	.05	.25*	* .17	.20*	.19*	.47**	.42**	.18	.21*	.25**	.26**	.05	[. 0]	3.1	5 .31	** .34	** .92	 **			
21. S to C Sat 1	5.64	1.16	12	08	.20*	.12	.13	.08	.02	.12	.48**	.48**	.18	14	.13 .1	5	7** .55	** .28	<del>**</del> .29	** .11	.12	*		
22. S to C Sat 2	5.70	1.22	13	09	.17	.06	.15	60.	.01	.10	.47**	.48**	.18	.17	.12	14 10	5** .57	** .25	s** .25	** .12	.15	.92	**	
23. S to P Sat 1	5.83	1.18	.03	00.	.04	00.	.18	.05	.31**	.25**	.14	.15	.22*	.10	.22* .2	3* .1	4.1	5	* :22	* .42	** .41	** .41	** .38*	
24. S to P Sat 2	5.83	1.43	.04	01	.06	00.	.13	.03	.34**	.25**	.07	60.	.16	03	.19* .20	*	7 .1	7	* .25	** .41	** .44	**	** .38*	* .92**
C=Child P=Pare	C=C	tennet	tont 0		aticfac	,tion																		

C=Child. P=Parent. S=Stepparent. Sat=Satisfaction. \* p<.05;\*\*p<.01</pre>

		Everyday talk	Satisfaction
Actor effect	Child	.150**	.355**
	Parent	.122**	.436**
	Stepparent	.145**	.535**
Partner effect	Child	.085**	.279**
	Parent	.012	.313*
	Stepparent	.033	.135
Relationship effect	Child-parent	.141**	.463**
	Child-stepparent	.247**	1.078**
	Parent-child	.064*	.037
	Parent-stepparent	.058†	1.194**
	Stepparent-child	.153**	.490**
	Stepparent-parent	.035	.614**

**Table 2**. Social Relations Model Variance Estimates for Everyday Talk and Satisfaction (N = 114 stepfamilies)

All variance estimates are unstandardized. Relationship effects represent unique variance in everyday talk (or relational satisfaction) after accounting for variances attributed to actor and partner effects. Since variance is, in principle, nonnegative, one-tailed (rather than two-tailed) Z-tests were used to determine whether effects differ from zero (Kenny et al., 2006).

p < .06; \* p < .05; \*\* p < .01

talk with the parent (i.e., the spouse), suggesting that the unique relationship effect is relatively constant across all 114 stepfamilies (see Kenny et al., 2006). Contrary to the results for actor and relationship effects, however, only the child's partner effect was statistically significant. This indicates that while children vary in terms of the frequencies of talk that they elicit across all 114 stepfamilies, parents and stepparents do not. Consequently, in response to the first research question, most of the variance in patterns of everyday talk among the three stepfamily members was the result of *both* actor and relationship effects, though the partner effect for children was a notable exception.

According to Kenny et al. (2006), a better understanding of the importance of each social relations component can be gleaned by calculating the extent to which each component contributes to explaining variance in everyday talk. Table 3 presents the contributions of the components (i.e., the percentages of the variance explained by each social relations effect) to the total construct variance (i.e., excluding error variance) in everyday talk among different dyadic relationships. For example, the total construct variance in the child's everyday talk with the parent consists of the sum of the variances for the child's actor effect, the parent's partner effect, and the child–parent relationship effect. The contribution of children's actor effects to the total variance in children's everyday talk with their parents is computed by dividing the child's actor effect by the total construct variance.

The largest part of the variance in everyday talk was explained by actor (between 35% and 76%) and relationship (between 18% and 57%) effects. Partner effects contributed very little to the variance in everyday talk in dyadic relationships unless the

	E	Everyday ta	lk	Relat	ional satisf	action
	Actor	Partner	Relationship	Actor	Partner	Relationship
Child-parent	49	4	47	31	28	41
Child-stepparent	35	8	57	23	8	69
Parent-child	45	31	24	58	37	5
Parent-stepparent	57	16	27	25	7	68
Stepparent-child	38	22	40	41	21	38
Stepparent-parent	76	6	18	37	21	42

**Table 3.** Percentage of Variance Explained by the Social Relations Model Variance Estimates (N = 114 stepfamilies)

partner was a child. In line with the above described results, differences in everyday talk do not seem to depend as much on individual stepfamily members' dispositions to elicit talk from others.

Although this observation cannot be tested, it is worth noting that relationship effects contributed more to the variance in certain relationships than actor effects, whereas in other relationships, the reverse pattern emerged. For example, relationship effects were more important than actor effects for everyday talk in the stepparent- child relationship (M=48.5% vs. M=36.5%). The pattern was reversed for the remarried relationship and the parent-child relationship, as actor effects were much more important than relationship effects for stepparent-parent talk (M=66.5% vs. M=22.5%) and, to a somewhat lesser extent, parent-child talk (M=47% vs. M=35.5%). Thus, stepparents' and stepchildren's tendencies to engage in everyday talk in stepfamilies appears to depend more strongly on the unique relationships developed with each other than on individual dispositions. Among remarried adults, however, it appears that both parents' and stepparents' individual dispositions to talk makes more of a difference than the specific relationships they have with each other. Finally, although children were the only members of the stepfamily triad that varied in terms of eliciting different frequencies of talk from parents and stepparents, the variance in parent-child everyday talk was driven somewhat more by the parent actor effect, whereas the variance in stepparentchild everyday talk was driven by the stepparent- child relationship effect.

Is everyday talk reciprocal? Generalized and dyadic reciprocity correlations were estimated by correlating (a) the actor and partner effects (for generalized reciprocity) for each family member and (b) the relationship effects (for dyadic reciprocity) for everyday talk between two family members. Given nonsignificant partner effects for both parent and stepparent everyday talk, only one generalized reciprocity estimate for children could be made and that estimate was statistically nonsignificant (r=.34, p=.14). Thus, an individual stepfamily member's tendency to engage more frequently in everyday conversations is relatively unrelated to how much conversation is elicited from other stepfamily members. There was, however, a statistically significant dyadic reciprocity effect for everyday talk in the stepparent–child relationship, as well as a marginally significant dyadic effect in the parent–child relationship (see Table 4). Evidently, (step)

	Everyday talk	Relational satisfaction	
Child/parent_parent/child	.62†	23	
Child/stepparent_stepparent/child	.41*	.59**	
Parent/stepparent_stepparent/parent	.34	.32†	

Table 4. Dyadic Reciprocity for Relationship-Specific Talk and Satisfaction (N = 114 stepfamilies)

p < .09; p < .05; \* p < .01

children reporting talking to a stepparent more on an everyday basis were more likely to have a stepparent reporting talking to them than stepchildren less likely to engage in everyday talk with a stepparent. Likewise, children reporting talking with parents more on an everyday basis were more likely to have parents reciprocating than those children less likely to talk with parents.

# *Is Relational Satisfaction in Parent/Stepparent/Child Triads Dispositional, Relational, or Both (RQ2)?*

As can be seen in Table 2, the results for relational satisfaction largely parallel those for everyday talk, though there are a couple of notable exceptions. All actor effects were significant, indicating that there are individual differences in how satisfied individual members are with their relationships with other stepfamily members. All but one of the relationship effects were significant as well, indicating that the extent to which stepfamily members are satisfied with family relationships depends on the unique relationship between two family members. The one exception was satisfaction in the parent-child relationship, where evidently parents' reports of satisfaction with children do not vary as a function of unique relationships with the children. Contrary to the results for everyday talk, significant partner effects for satisfaction emerged for both children and parents, indicating that the extent to which children and parents elicit higher ratings of satisfaction from other family members varies across stepfamilies. Interestingly, the partner effect for stepparents' satisfaction was not statistically significant, suggesting that stepparents did not differ in the extent to which they elicited varying degrees of relational satisfaction from either (step)children or spouses.

The relative importance of social relations components in accounting for variance in relational satisfaction again paralleled those found for everyday talk. The largest part of the variance was explained by actor and relationship effects (see Table 3; 23% to 58% and 5% to 69%, respectively). There were, however, some different trends that emerged for satisfaction among different dyadic relationships. Most notably, relationship effects were much more important than actor effects in both the child–stepparent and parent–stepparent relationship (M=68.5% vs. M=24%). The pattern of effects for stepparents' reports of relational satisfaction (including significant actor, partner, and relationship effects) were relatively comparable across relationships with both (step)children and spouses. For satisfaction in the parent–child relationship, however, parents' reports of satisfaction with their children was primarily a function of actor (58%) and partner effects (37%), whereas children's reports of satisfaction with their parent was more a function of relationship effects (41%), and to a somewhat lesser extent, actor (31%) and partner effects (28%). Taken as a whole, these results indicate that (a) family members' satisfaction with stepparents is primarily a function of the unique relationships formed with each stepparent, (b) stepparents' reports of both marital and parent/child satisfaction vary in similar ways as a function of actor, partner, and relationship effects, and (c) parents' satisfaction with children varies primarily as a function of individual dispositions to be satisfied in general, whereas children's satisfaction with parents varies primarily as a function of both individual dispositions and unique relationship effects.

Is relational satisfaction reciprocal? Contrary to the results for everyday talk, estimates of generalized reciprocity for relational satisfaction revealed significant effects for both children (r=.78, pB.01) and parents (r=.52, p<.05) in stepfamily triads. This suggests that children and parents more satisfied in relationships with other stepfamily members tend to elicit higher ratings of satisfaction from other stepfamily members. Likewise, there was a significant dyadic reciprocity effect for relational satisfaction in the stepparent-child relationship, as well as a marginally significant dyadic reciprocity effect for satisfaction in the parent-stepparent (or spousal) relationship (see Table 4). The more satisfied (step)children reported being in relationships with stepparents, the more stepparents reported being satisfied with stepchildren. Likewise, remarried adults in stepfamily systems are perhaps likely to reciprocate satisfaction in the marital relationship.

# *How does Relational Satisfaction in Stepfamilies Vary as a Function of Everyday Talk* (*RQ3*)?

To address the final research question, the associations between everyday talk and relational satisfaction across stepfamily relationships were explored. To examine whether stepfamily members who engaged in more everyday talk were more likely to be satisfied in their relationships with other family members, the correlations between a family member's actor effect for everyday talk and that family member's actor effect for relational satisfaction was computed, as well as the family member's partner effect for talk and that family member's partner effect for satisfaction. As seen in Table 5, the significant correlation for the stepparent's actor effect indicates that stepparents engaging more frequently in everyday talk with other stepfamily members are more likely to be satisfied in relationships with other stepfamily members. Conversely, children and parents engaging in more everyday talk with other stepfamily members are not necessarily more inclined to be more satisfied in stepfamily relationships. In addition, the significant correlation for the child's partner effect indicates that children eliciting more everyday talk from parents and stepparents are more likely to receive higher ratings of relational satisfaction from both adults in the stepfamily triad.

	Intrapersona	l correlations	Interpersonal co	orrelations
	Actor effect everyday talk- satisfaction	Partner effect everyday talk- satisfaction	Actor effect everyday talk-partner effect satisfaction	Actor effect satisfaction -partner effect everyday talk
Child	01	.53*	.17	.28
Parent	.24	NA	.22	NA
Stepparent	.40*	NA	.74*	NA

**Table 5.** Correlations among Stepfamily Members' Everyday Talk and Relational Satisfaction across Stepfamily Relationships

NA=Not available given unreliable variance for both parent and stepparent partner effects. \* p < .05

Next, the issue of whether stepfamily members reporting greater frequencies of everyday talk were more likely to be perceived as satisfying family members was examined. The correlations between a family member's actor effect for everyday talk and that family member's partner effect for satisfaction were computed, as were the correlations between a family member's actor effect for satisfaction and that family member's partner effect for everyday talk (see Table 5). The only significant correlation to emerge in this part of the analysis was for the stepparent's actor effect, suggesting that stepparents engaging in more everyday talk across all family relationships are more likely to be perceived as satisfying members of the stepfamily than those less likely to engage in everyday talk. For children and parents, however, engaging in more everyday talk does not necessarily mean that they will be perceived as being more satisfying family members.

Finally, the associations among everyday talk and relational satisfaction *within* specific stepfamily relationships were examined. To determine whether stepfamily members engaging in more everyday talk within specific relationships are more likely to be satisfied in these relationships, the correlations between a family member's relationship effect for everyday talk and that family member's relationship effect for satisfaction were computed (see Table 6). Four of the six correlations were significant, indicating that (a) children engaging in more everyday talk with parents and stepparents are more likely to be satisfied in both relationships, (b) parents engaging in more everyday talk with spouses (stepparents) are more likely to be satisfied in marriages, and (c) stepparents engaging in more everyday talk with stepchildren are more likely to be satisfied with stepchildren. Interestingly, parents are not necessarily more satisfied with children, nor are stepparents necessarily more satisfied in marriage, as a function of engaging in more everyday talk.

To examine whether stepfamily members engaging in more everyday talk are more likely to be perceived as satisfying relational partners, the correlations between a family member's relationship effect for everyday talk and his or her dyadic partner's relationship effect for satisfaction were computed (see Table 6). Contrary to the results noted above, only one significant correlation emerged, namely the correlation between the stepparent's relationship effect for everyday talk and the (step)child's relationship

Relationship effect every	day ta	lk-relational satisfaction	
Intrapersonal		Interpersonal	
$Child \rightarrow Parent_Child \rightarrow Parent$	.44†	Child → Parent-Parent → Child	.13
$Child \rightarrow Stepparent\_Child \rightarrow Stepparent$	.41*	$Child \rightarrow Stepparent\_Stepparent \rightarrow Child$	.18
$Parent \rightarrow Child_Parent \rightarrow Child$	.25	$Parent \rightarrow Child\_Child \rightarrow Parent$	16
$Parent \rightarrow Stepparent-Parent \rightarrow Stepparent$	.53*	$Parent \rightarrow Stepparent-Stepparent \rightarrow Parent$	.29
Stepparent $\rightarrow$ Child-Stepparent $\rightarrow$ Child	.66*	Stepparent $\rightarrow$ Child-Child $\rightarrow$ Stepparent	.34*
Stepparent $\rightarrow$ Parent-Stepparent $\rightarrow$ Parent	23	$Stepparent \rightarrow Parent - Parent \rightarrow Stepparent$	.48

Table 6. Correlations between Everyday Talk and Relational Satisfaction within Stepfamily Relationships

† *p* < .10 ; \* *p* < .05

effect for satisfaction. This suggests that stepparents talking more frequently with stepchildren as a function of unique relationships have stepchildren that are more satisfied with stepparenting than stepparents engaging less frequently in everyday talk.

### Discussion

Framed in family systems theory, the principle goal of this research was to explore the intrapersonal and interpersonal mechanisms underlying reported frequencies of everyday talk and relational satisfaction in stepfamilies. In general, the results of the SRM analyses indicate that everyday conversations and reports of relational satisfaction among parent-stepparent-child triads vary as a function of both individual dispositions and the unique characteristics of different stepfamily relationships. Interestingly, both children's and parents' reports of relational satisfaction with the stepparent varied primarily as a function of unique relationship effects, whereas stepparents' reports of satisfaction with spouses (i.e., parents) and stepchildren varied as a function of actor, partner, and relationship effects. In addition, the relationship between everyday talk and relational satisfaction emerged more so from intrapersonal mechanisms than from interpersonal mechanisms, though one notable exception emerged in the interpersonal dynamics underlying the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Consequently, these results extend theoretical understandings of the various ways in which interpersonal communication is associated with relational satisfaction in stepfamily systems.

The first research question explored the extent to which everyday talk varied as a function of dispositional and relational factors. The results indicate that everyday conversations in parent-stepparent-child triads are a function primarily of actor and relationship effects. In other words, the extent to which patterns of everyday talk vary across stepfamilies is explained primarily by knowing the stepfamily members as individuals, as well as the unique relationships that emerge among different dyads within the stepfamily triad. Interestingly, parents and stepparents do not vary in their

tendencies to elicit different levels of everyday talk, though children do vary to some small extent. Likewise, the only nonsignificant relationship effect emerged for stepparents' reports of everyday talk with spouses, where evidently such patterns of talk emerge almost entirely as a function of individual differences in stepparents' dispositions to talk. These results highlight the extent to which conversational patterns vary as a function, in part, of relational dynamics. In previous research on disclosure in intact families, Finkenauer et al. (2004) found that disclosure patterns varied as a function of actor and relationship effects primarily. Although disclosure represents a much more specific communication behavior than everyday talk, the results of the present study further confirm those of Finkenauer et al. by revealing that conversational patterns of all kinds (e.g., small talk, gossip, catching up, love talk, conflict, etc.) vary primarily as a function of both individual dispositions to talk and the unique patterns of talk that relational partners constructed together.

Interestingly, Finkenauer et al. (2004) reported that relationship effects were more important than actor effects for parent-parent (or spousal) disclosures, parents' disclosures to children, and siblings' disclosures, whereas actor effects were more important than relationship effects for children's disclosures to parents. Although this study did not include siblings or family effect estimates (given reports from only three family members), the results do provide preliminary evidence to suggest different trends among actor and relationship effects for everyday talk in stepfamily triads. Contrary to Finkenauer et al.'s research, the results of this study indicate that actor effects were more important than relationship effects for everyday talk in remarried relationships and parent-child relationships, whereas relationship effects were more important than actor effects for everyday talk in the child-stepparent relationship. These results not only highlight potential differences in the sources of variation among conversational patterns in both first-marriage families and stepfamilies, but they further illustrate the unique role of the stepparent, as frequencies of everyday talk in the stepparent-(step) child relationship varied primarily as a function of unique relational dynamics. Not only must stepfamily members build a shared conception of how the family is to manage its daily business (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994), but given our findings, it appears as though the stepparent occupies a central role in determining how conversational patterns may influence the development of this shared conception.

Having explored everyday talk in stepfamily triads, attention was then given to relational satisfaction (RQ2). By and large, the results for satisfaction paralleled those found for everyday talk, though a few notable exceptions emerged. Most notably, relationship effects were more important than actor effects in both children's and parents' satisfaction with stepparents, whereas stepparents' satisfaction with both stepchildren and spouses varied as a function of actor, partner, and relationship effects. That is, for children and parents relational satisfaction varies primarily as a function of the unique relationships formed with the stepparent. For stepparents, however, satisfaction with the other two members of the triad varies as a function of how satisfied they are as individuals in general, how satisfying their unique relationships are with each family member, and to a lesser extent, how much satisfaction (step)children and spouses elicit.

Previous researchers have documented the precarious position that stepparents find themselves in due, in part, to the ambiguities surrounding the stepparent role (e.g., Fine et al., 1998; Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999; Schrodt, 2006b), the struggles residential parents sometimes face allowing new spouses to "parent" their children (e.g., Coleman et al., 2001), and the tensions and ambivalence stepchildren experience in relationships with stepparents (e.g., Baxter et al., 2004). When coupled with previous research, the results of this study further support that satisfaction in the stepfamily triad is primarily a function of the unique relationships formed with the stepparent, which in turn, can place increased stress and tension on stepparents' attempts to cocreate a new family environment that functions in satisfying and healthy ways. These results also suggest that children and parents more satisfied with other stepfamily members are more likely to elicit higher ratings of satisfaction, and that stepparents are more likely to reciprocate ratings of relational satisfaction with both (step)children and spouses. Whereas dyadic reciprocity in everyday talk was more evident in adult relationships with children in the stepfamily triad, for satisfaction, such reciprocity was more evident in family members' relationships with the stepparent.

The final purpose of this investigation was to explore the extent to which relational satisfaction varied as a function of everyday talk in stepfamily triads (RQ3). Across all stepfamily relationships, the results indicate that stepparents engaging in more everyday talk are more satisfied in relationships with, and are more likely to elicit higher ratings of satisfaction from, other family members. In previous research, Ganong and his colleagues (1999) found that stepparents making continuous affinityseeking efforts and demonstrating genuine interest in building and maintaining close relationships with stepchildren were more likely to have stepchildren reciprocating such efforts. Our results further Ganong et al.'s research by identifying an additional communication behavior, namely everyday conversation, that enhances stepparents' relationships with other family members and could potentially lead to more satisfying step-family relationships.

The final set of analyses compared the intrapersonal and interpersonal mechanisms underlying the association between everyday talk and relational satisfaction *within* specific stepfamily relationships. In general, the results suggest that the association between both constructs may stem more so from intrapersonal dynamics in each dyadic relationship than from interpersonal dynamics, though one notable exception emerged in the stepparent–stepchild relationship. For children's relationships with both parent and stepparent, and parents' relationships with spouses, the tendency to engage in everyday talk as a function of the unique relationship that has emerged between two family members was positively associated with an increase in satisfaction with the specific relationship in question. Indeed, among all four significant correlations reported in Table 6, three dealt specifically with unique relationship effects with the stepparent. Thus, the intrapersonal dynamics underlying the association between everyday conversation and satisfaction in the stepfamily triad rests again on the unique relationships formed with the stepparent.

Collectively, then, the results of this study provide at least three theoretical implications worth noting. First, the results extend family systems theory by highlighting the various and complex ways in which different individuals, communicating across different stepfamilies and within specific stepfamily relationships, experience varying degrees of relational satisfaction as a function of their everyday conversations with other family members. More often than not, family researchers have been challenged to adequately account for the systemic nature of family interaction. To the extent that the social relations model begins to account for individual, dyadic, and group processes in a single analysis, it becomes a useful methodological tool for extending empirical understandings of family system principles (e.g., interdependence, complexity, wholeness, equifinality, etc.).

Second, the results of this study further confirm a growing consensus in the stepfamily literature that the stepparent role is not only what primarily distinguishes stepfamilies from other family types (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003b; Ganong et al., 1999; Schrodt, 2006b, 2006c), but that family relationships with stepparents in general are most central to determining stepfamily functioning, both for parents (spouses) and for stepchildren. Across all sets of analyses in this investigation, the stepparent role was the one that consistently emerged as having statistically significant effects at both the individual and dyadic levels, as well as at both the intrapersonal and the interpersonal levels of analysis. As Ganong and Coleman (1994) noted, the stepparent-stepchild relationship is typically considered to be the most challenging and stressful relationship in stepfamilies, due to the fact that oftentimes steprelationships are involuntary in nature. However, the results of the present study provide some evidence to suggest that the remarried relationship and the stepparent-(step)child relationship may have more in common than originally thought. For example, across both children and parents, stepparents were the only member of the stepfamily triad to have no significant partner effect for both everyday talk and relational satisfaction. In other words, stepparents do not vary in the extent to which they elicit varying reports of relational satisfaction from children and remarried spouses (i.e., parents), but rather, children and parents' satisfaction with stepparents varies primarily as a function of the unique relationships they have formed with the stepparent/spouse. These trends offer new theoretical considerations for the stepparent role, as historically, the general tendency of stepfamily researchers has been to focus on the tremendous ambiguity and variability surrounding the stepparent role (e.g., Fine et al., 1998; Schrodt, 2006b), almost to the exclusion of investigating the similarities that may exist in parents' and children's communication patterns and relational behaviors with the stepparent.

Finally, the results of this study extend our understanding of communication behaviors that facilitate satisfying relationships in stepfamilies. With a few notable exceptions (e.g., Emmers-Sommer, 2004; Finkenauer et al., 2004), most of the previous research on interpersonal communication and satisfaction has focused primarily on behaviors that could potentially impede healthy and satisfying relationships. Contrary to previous research, the present study highlights the extent to which seemingly mundane, everyday conversations also contribute to satisfying stepfamily relationships. In addition, some scholars have argued that relational satisfaction for remarried couples is based on the interpersonal communication skills of the spouses (Beaudry et al., 2004), and consistent with this research, the results of this study indicate that parents who engage in more everyday talk with spouses (i.e., stepparents) are more likely to be satisfied in marriage. However, the results provide no evidence to suggest that stepparents' everyday talk is associated with self-reported, or partners', satisfaction in the marriage. Rather, it appears as though the communication skills of stepparents and (step)children may be more pivotal in determining not only own satisfaction with each other, but also general levels of satisfaction among all three members of the stepfamily triad.

Despite the contributions of this research, the results should be interpreted with caution given the inherent limitations of the research design. For example, in the absence of an established measure for everyday talk, this study relied on self-report items for each type of everyday talk in Goldsmith and Baxter's (1996) taxonomy and some may question the validity of collapsing distinct types of talk (e.g., small talk, gossip, decision making, relationship talk) into a single latent construct. Certain forms of everyday talk included in the original taxonomy were omitted because they were less relevant for adults in stepfamilies (e.g., "class information talk" and "asking someone out"). Given that Goldsmith and Baxter's taxonomy was derived from a student population, future research is needed to further validate the inventory employed here.

Qualitative investigations using journals or in-depth interviews may yield additional categories of everyday talk that are more relevant to the lives of stepfamily members than those included in the original taxonomy. In their investigation of coparenting relationships, Braithwaite, McBride, and Schrodt (2003) used journals to describe the communication patterns of coparents raising children in stepfamilies. They found that most of the coparents' interactions were "business-like" and entirely focused on the children. Although the present study focused entirely on the communication patterns within the stepfamily household, future researchers may find that the topics of everyday conversation that occur between different households in a stepfamily system are comprised of different topics than those included in Goldsmith and Baxter's (1996) original taxonomy. Nevertheless, the use of a latent variable approach (i.e., SEM) in this study may help mitigate more general concerns about the decision to use 20 different types of talk as indicators of a single construct, as only the information that each indicator had in common with the latent construct of "everyday talk" would have been included in the model. In many ways, the latent construct of everyday talk in this report represents a broad assessment of communication frequency among all three stepfamily members.

Perhaps a greater limitation to the present study involves the sample. Although every effort was made to gather a large sample of stepfamilies, the present sample provides only enough statistical power to detect moderate effect sizes. Likewise, the inclusion of just three stepfamily members per family unit prevented estimates of family effects, which in turn, may have altered the percentages of variance accounted for by actor, partner, and relationship effects. Future researchers might consider other interpersonal communication behaviors that are central to stepfamily functioning and appropriate for round-robin research designs. For example, Afifi and her colleagues (Afifi, 2003; Afifi & Schrodt, 2003a; Amato & Afifi, 2006; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007) have documented the feelings of triangulation that children often experience in postdivorce and intact family relationships. One fruitful extension of this research would be to examine not only children's feelings of being caught in the middle, but parents' and stepparents' feelings of triangulation as well. Likewise, social relations model analyses of family conflict behaviors and general misunderstanding (cf. Sillars et al., 2005) may further theoretical explanations of key relational dynamics that impede relational satisfaction in stepfamilies. Through these types of investigations, family scholars can further delineate the interpersonal communication dynamics that facilitate healthy (step)family functioning.

*Acknowledgments* — The authors wish to thank current and former University of Nebraska–Lincoln graduate students Aimee Miller, Stacy Tye-Williams, Emily Lamb Normand, and Meredith Marko Harrigan for their assistance with data collection.

## References

- Afifi, T. D. (2003). "Feeling caught" in stepfamilies: Managing boundary turbulence through appropriate communication privacy rules. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 20, 729–755.
- Afifi, T. D., & Schrodt, P. (2003a). "Feeling caught" as a mediator of adolescents' and young adults' avoidance and satisfaction with their parents in divorced and non-divorced households. *Communication Monographs*, 70, 142–173.
- Afifi, T. D., & Schrodt, P. (2003b). Uncertainty and the avoidance of the state of one's family in stepfamilies, post-divorce single parent families, and first marriage families. *Human Communication Research*, 29, 516–532.
- Amato, P. R., & Afifi, T. D. (2006). Feeling caught between parents: Adult children's relations with parents and subjective well-being. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 68, 222–235.
- Baxter, L. A. (1992). Forms and functions of intimate play in personal relationships. Human Communication Research, 18, 336–363.
- Baxter, L. A. (2004). Distinguished scholar article: Relationships as dialogues. Personal Relationships, 11, 1–22.
- Baxter, L. A., Braithwaite, D. O., & Bryant, L. E. (2006). Types of communication triads perceived by young-adult stepchildren in established stepfamilies. *Communication Studies*, *57*, 381–400.
- Baxter, L. A., Braithwaite, D. O., Bryant, L., & Wagner, A. (2004). Stepchildren's perceptions of the contradictions in communication with stepparents. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 21, 447–467.
- Beaudry, M., Boisvert, J. M., Simard, M., Parent, C., & Blais, M. (2004). Communication: A key component to meeting the challenges of stepfamilies. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 42, 85–105.

- Bowen, M. (1976). Theory in the practice of psychotherapy. In P. J. Guerin, ed., *Family therapy: Theory and practice* (pp. 42–90). New York: Gardner Press.
- Braithwaite, D. O., McBride, M. C., & Schrodt, P. (2003). "Parent teams" and the everyday interactions of co-parenting in stepfamilies. *Communication Reports*, 16, 93–111.
- Braithwaite, D. O., Toller, P., Daas, K., Durham, W., & Jones, A. (2008). Centered but not caught in the middle: Stepchildren's perceptions of dialectical contradictions in the communication of co-parents. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 36, 33–55.
- Branje, S. J. T., van Lieshout, C. F. M., & van Aken, M. A. G. (2005). Relations between agreeableness and perceived support in family relationships: Why nice people are not always supportive. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 29(2), 120–128.
- Browne, M. W., & Cudeck, R. (1993). Alternative ways of assessing model fit. In K. A. Bollen & J. S. Long (Eds.), *Testing structural equation models* (pp. 136–162). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Caughlin, J. P. (2002). The demand/withdraw pattern of communication as a predictor or marital satisfaction over time: Unresolved issues and future directions. *Human Communication Research*, *28*, 49–85.
- Caughlin, J. P. (2003). Family communication standards: What counts as excellent family communication and how are such standards associated with family satisfaction? *Human Communication Research*, 29, 5–40.
- Caughlin, J. P., & Afifi, T. D. (2004). When is topic avoidance unsatisfying? Examining moderators of the association between avoidance and dissatisfaction. *Human Communication Re*search, 30, 479–513.
- Caughlin, J. P., & Golish, T. D. (2002). An analysis of the association between topic avoidance and dissatisfaction: Comparing perceptual and interpersonal explanations. *Communication Monographs*, 69, 275–295.
- Caughlin, J. P., & Huston, T. L. (2002). A contextual analysis of the association between demand/ withdraw and marital satisfaction. *Personal Relationships*, 9, 95–119.
- Caughlin, J. P., Huston, T. L., & Houts, R. M. (2000). How does personality matter in marriage? An examination of trait anxiety, interpersonal negativity, and marital satisfaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78, 326–336.
- Cherlin, A. J., & Furstenberg, F. F. (1994). Stepfamilies in the United States: A reconsideration. Annual Review of Sociology, 20, 359–381.
- Cissna, K. N., Cox, D. E., & Bochner, A. P. (1990). The dialectic of marital and parental relationships within the stepfamily. *Communication Monographs*, 57, 44–61.
- Coleman, M., Ganong, L. H., & Fine, M. (2000). Reinvestigating remarriage: Another decade of progress. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 1288–1307.
- Coleman, M., Ganong, L. H., & Fine, M. (2004). Communication in stepfamilies. In A. Vangelisti, ed., *Handbook of family communication* (pp. 215–232). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Coleman, M. A., Ganong, L. G., Fine, M. A., Downs, K. M., & Pauk, N. (2001). When you're not the Brady Bunch: Identifying perceived conflicts and resolution strategies in stepfamilies. *Personal Relationships*, 8, 57–73.

- Cook, R., & DeFrain, J. (2005). Using discourse analysis to explore family strengths: A preliminary study. *Marriage and Family Review*, 38(1), 3–12.
- Cook, W. L. (1994). A structural equation model of dyadic relationships within the family system. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *62*, 500–509.
- Dainton, M., & Stafford, L. (1993). Routine maintenance behaviors: A comparison of relationship type, partner similarity, and sex differences. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 10, 255–271.
- Duck, S., Rutt, D. J., Hurst, M. H., & Strejc, H. (1991). Some evident truths about conversations in everyday relationships: All communications are not created equal. *Human Communication Research*, 18, 228–267.
- Emmers-Sommer, T. M. (2004). The effect of communication quality and quantity indicators on intimacy and relational satisfaction. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 21, 399–411.
- Fine, M. A., Coleman, M., & Ganong, L. H. (1998). Consistency in perceptions of the step-parent role among step-parents, parents, and stepchildren. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 15, 811–829.
- Finkenauer, C., Engels, R. C. M. E., Branje, S. J. T., & Meeus, W. (2004). Disclosure and relationship satisfaction in families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66, 195–209.
- Galvin, K. M., Dickson, F. C., & Marrow, S. R. (2006). Systems theory: Patterns and (w)holes in family communication. In D. O. Braithwaite & L. A. Baxter (Eds.), *Engaging theories in family communication: Multiple perspectives* (pp. 309–324). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ganong, L. H., & Coleman, M. (1994). Remarried family relationships. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ganong, L. H., & Coleman, M. (2004). Stepfamily relationships: Development, dynamics, and interventions. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.
- Ganong, L., Coleman, M., Fine, M., & Martin, P. (1999). Stepparents' affinity-seeking and affinity-maintaining strategies with stepchildren. *Journal of Family Issues*, 20, 299–327.
- Goldsmith, D. J., & Baxter, L. A. (1996). Constituting relationships in talk: A taxonomy of speech events in social and personal relationships. *Human Communication Research*, 23, 87–114.
- Golish, T. D. (2003). Stepfamily communication strengths: Understanding the ties that bind. *Hu-man Communication Research*, 29, 41–80.
- Hu, L., & Bentler, P. M. (1999). Cutoff criteria for fit indexes in covariance structure analysis: Conventional criteria versus new alternatives. *Structural Equation Modeling: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 6, 1–55.
- Huston, T. L., McHale, S. M., & Crouter, A. C. (1986). When the honeymoon's over: Changes in the marriage relationship over the first year. In R. Gilmour & S. Duck (Eds.), *The emerging field of personal relationships* (pp. 109–132). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Kashy, D. A., Jellison, W. A., & Kenny, D. A. (2004). Modeling the interdependence among family members. *Journal of Family Communication*, 4, 265–293.
- Kenny, D. A., Kashy, D. A., & Cook, W. L. (2006). Dyadic data analysis. New York: Guilford Press.
- Kenny, D. A., & LaVoie, L. (1984). The social relations model. In L. Berkowitz, ed., Advances in experimental psychology (Vol. 18, pp. 44–85). Orlando, FL: Academic Press.
- Koerner, A. F., & Fitzpatrick, M. A. (2002a). Toward a theory of family communication. Communication Theory, 12, 70–91.

- Koerner, A. F., & Fitzpatrick, M. A. (2002b). Understanding family communication patterns and family functioning: The roles of conversation orientation and conformity orientation. In W. B. Gundykunst, ed., *Communication yearbook 26* (pp. 36–68). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Marsh, J. C. (2003). Arguments for family strengths research. Social Work, 48, 147-149.
- Miller, P. J. E., Caughlin, J. P., & Huston, T. L. (2003). Trait expressiveness and marital satisfaction: The role of idealization processes. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 65, 978–995.
- Olson, D. H. (2000). Circumplex model of marital and family systems. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 22, 144–167.
- Peek, C. W., Bell, N. J., Waldren, T., & Sorell, G. T. (1988). Patterns of functioning in families of remarried and first-married couples. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 50, 699–708.
- Schrodt, P. (2006a). Development and validation of the Stepfamily Life Index. *Journal of Social* and Personal Relationships, 23, 427–444.
- Schrodt, P. (2006b). The Stepparent Relationship Index: Development, validation, and associations with stepchildren's perceptions of stepparent communication competence and closeness. *Personal Relationships*, 13, 167–182.
- Schrodt, P. (2006c). A typological examination of communication competence and mental health in stepchildren. *Communication Monographs*, 73, 309–333.
- Schrodt, P., & Afifi, T. D. (2007). Communication processes that predict young adults' feelings of being caught and their associations with mental health and family satisfaction. *Communication Monographs*, 74, 200–228.
- Schrodt, P., Braithwaite, D. O., Soliz, J., Tye-Williams, S., Miller, A., Normand, E. L., & Harrigan, M. M. (2007). An examination of everyday talk in stepfamily systems. *Western Journal* of Communication, 71, 216–234.
- Schrodt, P., & Ledbetter, A. M. (2007). Communication processes that mediate family communication patterns and mental well-being: A mean and covariance structures analysis of young adults from divorced and non-divorced families. *Human Communication Research*, 33, 330–356.
- Sillars, A., Koerner, A., & Fitzpatrick, M. A. (2005). Communication and understanding in parent- adolescent relationships. *Human Communication Research*, 31, 102–128.
- Tracy, K. (2002). Everyday talk: Building and reflecting identities. New York: Guilford Press.
- Von Bertalanffy, L. (1968). General systems theory. New York: George Braziller.
- Walsh, F. (1998). Strengthening family resilience. New York: Guilford Press.
- West, S. G. (2001). New approaches to missing data in psychological research. Psychological Methods, 6, 315–316.