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An Examination of Everyday Talk in Stepfamily Systems

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Abstract

This study explored frequencies of everyday talk in stepfamilies and the extent to which such frequencies of talk differed according to family relationship type. Participants included a parent, stepparent, and stepchild from 114 stepfamilies. Across relationship types, stepfamily members reported catching up, joking around, and recapping the day's events most frequently and interrogating family members least frequently. Significant differences in frequencies of everyday talk across different relational dyads emerged for all three members of the stepfamily system. However, relatively few differences emerged in stepchildren's reported frequencies of everyday talk with their stepparents and their nonresidential parents.

Keywords: Conflict, Everyday Talk, Nonresidential Parents, Stepfamilies, Stepparent-Stepchild Relationships

Over the last decade, communication scholars have shown an increased interest 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). As Gubrium and Holstein (1993) argued, the social world is constructed through everyday talk, and “discourse of all kinds ... are not

as much spoken or transcribed descriptions of reality, as they are tacitly constitutive of objects and events” (p. 66). In other words, everyday talk consists of recurring patterns of speech events that communicatively embody or enact personal relationships (Goldsmith & Baxter). A constitutive vision of everyday talk in personal relationships enables scholars to focus on communication as the primary means by which relational partners shape personal identities (Tracy, 2002) and build, enact, and transform relationships (Baxter, 2004; Penman, 2000). Consequently, communication scholars are working to address the constitutive nature of communication, and those who have studied everyday talk have done so largely at the level of dyadic romantic relationships (e.g., Baxter, 1992; Duck et al., 1991) and from the perspective of a single relational partner (Goldsmith & Baxter).

Despite the value of this research in providing a communication-based vocabulary for describing different types of relationships, social life is made up of, and complicated by, larger social networks. One such social network that typically has a profound influence on an individual’s identity, communication behaviors, and relational patterns is the family. Specifically, the stepfamily has captured the attention of social scientists across various disciplines due, in part, to the relational challenges and difficulties associated with adjusting to postdivorce and remarried family life. Defined by Ganong and Coleman (1994) as families in which “at least one of the adults has a child or children from a previous relationship” (p. 8), stepfamilies provide an ideal context for examining the types of everyday talk that constitute postdivorce and remarried family relationships. As Cherlin and Furstenberg (1994) argued, stepfamily members must “create a shared conception of how their family is to manage its daily business” (p. 370), and thus, we contend that this shared conception emerges from the seemingly mundane, everyday conversations that occur among different stepfamily members. While stepfamilies provide a potentially fruitful context for examining everyday talk, however, little is known about how stepfamily members interact and maintain relationships in the stepfamily through talk.

Family scholars are continuing their efforts to untangle the messages and message strategies that facilitate healthy stepfamily functioning (e.g., Afifi, 2003; Afifi & Schrodt, 2003a, 2003b; Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Golish, 2003; Schrodt, 2006a), yet three limitations to extant research formed the impetus for the present study. First, despite the potential heuristic value of examining family relationships via dialogue, with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001; Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998; Fine, Ganong, & Coleman, 1999; Golish, 2003), researchers have primarily approached the stepfamily from the perspective of a single member of the stepfamily system. Second, most researchers have focused their work primarily within the boundaries of stepfamily households and there has been a recent call to expand the boundaries of stepfamily research to include the nonresidential parent (e.g., Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Esposito, 1995). In particular, researchers have paid too little attention to how communication with the nonresidential parent is both similar to, and different from, communication with stepfamily members living in the same household (Braithwaite, Schrodt, & Baxter, 2006). Finally, some of the difficulties associated

with adjusting to postdivorce and stepfamily life may be tied to the topics of conversation that most frequently characterize certain types of stepfamily relationships, as well as to the larger pattern of interaction that occurs among different members of the stepfamily system. For example, Golish identified a number of communication strengths that differentiated strong stepfamilies from those still struggling with remarried family life, while Schrodt (2006a) differentiated among five different types of stepfamilies based on stepchildren's reports of stepfamily functioning and the stepparent-stepchild relationship. What remains unanswered from these lines of research, however, are the specific frequencies and content of talk that occur within the stepfamily system. Such information may not only provide a descriptive foundation for future theoretical work in stepfamily communication, but may also prove potentially useful for counselors and practitioners who may be seeking a more holistic understanding of communication patterns in stepfamily systems.

These limitations to extant research, therefore, provided the impetus for the present study. As Coleman, Ganong, and Fine (2004) noted, "most of what we know about communication in stepfamilies comes from studies that were not specifically designed to investigate communication patterns" (p. 227). Thus, our focus was to examine the types and frequencies of everyday talk in stepfamily systems and the extent to which stepfamily members engage in different kinds of talk.

Theoretical Perspective

We adopted a family systems perspective in the present study, as our goal was 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; Minuchin, 1974; Von Bertalanffy, 1968). A system is a set of interrelated parts that form a whole, and as Galvin et al. (2006) noted, systems theory has played a crucial role in the development of family communication research, in part, because it centers our attention on the holistic nature of interaction patterns. Although some scholars would argue that general systems theory constitutes a worldview or paradigm (e.g., Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Polkinghorne, 1983), at a minimum, family systems theory represents a "root metaphor for thinking about family interactions as well as concepts and language for talking about ongoing, changing family interaction" (Galvin et al., p. 311). As such, system theorists have identified seven key characteristics or tenets that characterize family systems (for a detailed review, see Galvin et al.). Although addressing all seven tenets lies well beyond the scope of our study, we relied more generally on three key principles.

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, family scholars may further our understanding of stepfamily systems by accounting for the various ways in which communication with members outside of the immediate stepfamily household (e.g., with nonresidential parents and stepparents) influences relationships within the 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 our attention on *complex relationships*. Each family is organized into numerous interpersonal subsystems (e.g., mother–son, husband–wife, 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 potential alliances, coalitions, and other forms of triangulation and loyalty divides that so often characterize postdivorce families and stepfamilies (e.g., Afifi, 2003; Afifi & Schrodt, 2003b; Amato & Afifi, 2006; Baxter, Braithwaite, & Bryant, 2006; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991, 1996).

In general, then, we relied on the principles of interdependence, wholeness, and complexity from family systems theory, in conjunction with previous research on everyday talk in personal relationships, to form the framework for our present investigation. Braithwaite and her colleagues (2006) noted, however, that few family communication scholars have adopted a family systems perspective when researching stepfamilies, due in part to the complexity of stepfamily structures, the difficulties in trying to collect data from multiple members of the same stepfamily, and the concern about upsetting what is often a “fragile peace” in stepfamilies. It comes as no surprise, then, that with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Afifi, 2003; Coleman et al., 2001; Golish, 2003), previous researchers have centered most of their work on either individual stepfamily members or a specific dyad within the stepfamily, including stepparent–stepchild, remarried couple, and residential parent–child dyads (for a detailed summary, see Braithwaite et al., 2006; Coleman et al., 2000). Adopting a systems perspective in the present study, therefore, allowed us to seek a more holistic picture of the patterns of talk that characterize stepfamily systems.

At the same time, we also relied on previous research examining everyday talk in personal relationships to provide a more general framework for the present study. In particular, Duck and his colleagues (1991) and Goldsmith and Baxter (1996) each provided sizable contributions to our understanding of 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*.

Although Duck et al.'s (1991) investigation and Goldsmith and Baxter's (1996) findings provide a general framework for understanding the everyday interactions that distinguish different types of personal relationships, to date, we know of no investigation that explores the frequencies of everyday talk that characterize stepfamily relationships at the systems level of analysis. Indeed, combining such an approach with family systems theory may, in fact, provide a heuristic tool for furthering our understanding of communication and stepfamily functioning. Thus, we advanced our first research question in the present study:

RQ1: How frequently do stepfamily members engage in different types of everyday talk?

Differences in Everyday Talk Among Stepfamily Members

A second, but perhaps more important goal in the present study was to explore differences in everyday talk among different stepfamily relationships. There is some evidence to suggest that different dyads within and outside of the immediate stepfamily do engage in different types of talk. For example, Cissna et al. (1990) examined how remarried couples interact to strengthen their marriage by spending time together, by establishing the role of the stepparent as an authority figure, and by presenting a "unified front" to their children. In a similar vein, Braithwaite, McBride, and Schrodt (2003) found that ex-spouses who were coparenting children in stepfamily systems typically relied on very brief, "business-like" conversations that focused almost exclusively on the well-being of their children.

Consistent with this research, studies focusing on the stepparent-stepchild relationship have found that stepparents enact a variety of affinity-seeking behaviors to develop and maintain their relationships with stepchildren (Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999), and that stepchildren often avoid a variety of topics with their stepparents in an effort to reduce (or perhaps maintain) uncertainty and ambiguity in their relationship (e.g., Afifi & Schrodt, 2003a; Golish & Caughlin, 2002). Finally, Fine and his colleagues (1998, 1999) found that stepchildren often have a different perspective on the role of the stepparent than either their parents or their stepparents, and thus, each stepfamily member may enact different types of talk based on different relational expectations.

Although each of these studies provide initial evidence to suggest that stepfamily members may enact different patterns of talk with different members in the system, with one notable exception (i.e., Golish, 2003), researchers have yet to directly examine such patterns from the perspectives of multiple family members. Thus, we advanced our second research question to explore possible differences in everyday talk among different stepfamily members:

RQ2: Are there significant differences in frequencies of everyday talk among different members of the stepfamily system?

Method

Participants

The data reported here were collected as part of a larger program of research investigating everyday talk, coparenting interactions, and relational satisfaction in stepfamily systems. In the present study, participants included 342 family members from 114 stepfamilies. To gather multiple perspectives on frequencies of everyday talk in stepfamilies, a stepchild, stepparent, and parent from the same stepfamily were surveyed. Thus, 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. The majority of participants were White (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 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 since the divorce ranged from 4 years to 29 years ($M = 15$, $SD = 5.5$). Finally, 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%).

Stepparents included 83 stepfathers and 31 stepmothers for whom the highest level of education completed ranged from some high school (1.8%) to a Ph.D. (7.0%), though the majority had completed some college (35.1%), a bachelor's degree (22.8%), or a high school diploma (21.1%). The majority of stepparents were remarried (89.5%) and had been previously divorced once (75.4%), though 4 (3.5%) had never been divorced, 15 (13.2%) had been divorced twice, and 2 (1.8%) had been divorced three times.

Parents included 29 fathers and 85 mothers for whom the highest level of education completed ranged from some high school (3.5%) to a Ph.D. (5.3%), though the majority had completed some college (34.2%), a bachelor's degree (24.6%), or a high school diploma (19.3%). The majority of parents were remarried (88.6%) and had been previously divorced once (69.3%), though 21 (18.4%) had been divorced twice and 3 (2.6%) had been divorced three times. Finally, both parents and stepparents reported combined household 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 6 months to 27 years ($M = 10.5$, $SD = 6.1$).

Procedures

The data were collected using purposive sampling techniques. First, the researchers entered classes at two large universities in the Midwest and Southwest, and solicited direct participation from a variety of undergraduate students. In order to qualify for participation, participants were told that they must be a member of a stepfamily. For those who remained uncertain as to whether or not they were members of a stepfamily, participants were further told that, at a minimum, 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, the researchers collected data using network sampling (Granovetter, 1976). Students who did not qualify as members of a stepfamily, as well as faculty members, friends, and fellow community members were asked to identify additional participants who met the criteria for inclusion and who would be willing to complete a questionnaire. Participants were asked to provide a phone number at the bottom of their consent form to verify participation, and they were instructed to return their questionnaires to the researchers in sealed envelopes so as to protect confidentiality. Again, students were awarded minimal class credit for identifying potential respondents and returning completed questionnaires.

In total, 65 stepfamilies from a large midwestern community and 49 stepfamilies from a large southwestern community returned completed questionnaires. To verify participation of those respondents who completed 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 and 20 behavioral indicators representing the different types of everyday talk identified by Goldsmith and Baxter (1996), as well as other measures unrelated to the current research report. The entire survey took approximately 35 minutes to complete.

Measure

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) (see Table 1). This decision excluded certain types of everyday talk considered less relevant for our research purposes (e.g., class information talk, asking someone out, etc.). Each member of the stepfamily triad reported

Table 1. Frequencies of Everyday Talk for Stepparents, Stepchildren, and Residential Parents in Stepfamily Systems (N = 342)

Types of talk	Stepparents	Stepchildren	Parents
1. Small talk: How often do you talk about current events to pass time and/or to avoid being rude?	2.66 (1.45)	2.92 (1.31)	2.66 (1.47)
2. Gossip: How often do you exchange opinions or information about someone else when that person isn't present?	2.30 (1.27)	2.74 (1.25)	2.30 (1.25)
3. Joking around: How often do you engage in playful talk to have fun or release tension?	3.17 (1.56)	3.60 (1.28)	3.27 (1.57)
4. Catching up: How often do you "catch up" by talking about events that have occurred since you last spoke?	3.18 (1.56)	3.66 (1.34)	3.38 (1.56)
5. Recapping the day's events: How often do you talk about what's up and about what happened to you during the day?	3.06 (1.60)	3.22 (1.37)	3.24 (1.66)
6. Reminiscing: How often do you talk about shared events you experienced together in the past?	2.84 (1.47)	2.99 (1.21)	3.08 (1.46)
7. Making up: When needed, how often do the two of you "make up," where one or both of you apologize for violating some expectations?	2.65 (1.44)	2.59 (1.30)	2.71 (1.43)
8. Love talk: How often do you talk in ways that express love and give attention and affection?	2.91 (1.64)	2.97 (1.40)	3.19 (1.69)
9. Relationship talk: How often do you talk about the state of your relationship?	2.41 (1.37)	2.15 (1.09)	2.51 (1.37)
10. Conflict: How often do you disagree?	2.40 (1.09)	2.67 (1.09)	2.58 (1.03)
11. Serious conversation: How often do you have serious conversations where you are both involved in an in-depth conversation about some personal or important topic?	2.68 (1.39)	3.05 (1.25)	2.91 (1.36)
12. Talking about problems: How often do you have conversations in which one of you shares about some problem you are having and the other person tries to help?	2.70 (1.42)	3.00 (1.29)	2.86 (1.43)
13. Complaining: How often do you complain to each other, where one of you expresses negative feelings or frustrations directed toward a topic, but not toward each other?	2.48 (1.32)	2.91 (1.21)	2.63 (1.29)

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued

Types of talk	Stepparents	Stepchildren	Parents
14. Persuading conversation: How often do you have conversations where one of you has the goal of convincing the other person to do something?	2.37 (1.25)	2.69 (1.14)	2.47 (1.19)
15. Decision-making: How often do you have conversations where the two of you are making a decision about some task?	2.60 (1.44)	2.73 (1.15)	2.83 (1.41)
16. Giving and getting instructions: How often do you have conversations in which one of you is giving the other information or directions about how to do some task?	2.56 (1.33)	2.75 (1.13)	2.66 (1.26)
17. Lecture: How often do you have one-way conversations, where one of you is telling the other how to act or what to do?	1.86 (1.06)	2.34 (1.26)	2.11 (1.07)
18. Interrogation: How often do you have one-way conversations, where one of you grills the other person with questions?	1.63 (.91)	2.01 (1.15)	1.74 (.89)
19. Making plans: How often do you or the other person arrange meetings or arrange to do something with someone else?	2.40 (1.31)	2.78 (1.19)	2.61 (1.31)
20. Asking a favor: How often do you ask each other for a favor?	2.60 (1.39)	2.95 (1.23)	2.78 (1.35)

Responses were solicited using a Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Regularly*). Standard deviations are in parentheses.

frequencies of everyday talk for every other member of the stepfamily system, including nonresidential parents (or ex-spouses). For stepchildren, directions asked participants to indicate how frequently, during a typical week, you engage in each of the following kinds of talk with each of three different people: your parent (i.e., the parent with whom you lived or are currently living with), your stepparent, and your nonresidential parent (i.e., the parent with whom you do not tend to live). Directions were then modified for adult members of the stepfamily system (e.g., parents and stepparents), alternating the target relationships for whom frequencies of everyday talk were reported. Responses were solicited using a 5-point, Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Regularly*).

Data Analysis

The first research question was addressed by analyzing frequencies of everyday talk for each stepfamily member across all family relationships. The second research

question was addressed using three separate, multivariate analyses of covariance (MANCOVAs) for each member of the stepfamily system (i.e., stepchild, stepparent, and parent). Given that the initial data set was entered using the family unit as the level of analysis, separate data sets were created for stepchildren, parents, and stepparents respectively.¹ Relationship type (i.e., stepchild, stepparent, parent, and non-residential parent) was then entered as the between-groups variable, while the 20 different types of everyday talk were entered as the criterion variables. Given evidence to suggest that time is an influential factor in stepfamily relationships (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003a; Hetherington, 1999), different indicators of time were included in the model as covariates. For stepchildren, length of time since their parents' divorce (or separation) was included, whereas for parents and stepparents length of stepfamily membership was included. For significant multivariate effects, univariate tests were then examined for each type of everyday talk, followed by cell comparisons using Scheffe follow-ups.

Results

RQ1: Frequencies of Everyday Talk Across Stepfamily Relationships

Table 1 presents frequencies of everyday talk for stepparents, stepchildren, and parents across all stepfamily relationships. All three members of the stepfamily system reported *catching up*, *joking around*, and *recapping the day's events* more frequently than other forms of everyday talk. Likewise, parents and stepparents reported engaging in *love talk* and *reminiscing* more frequently than the remaining forms of everyday talk, whereas stepchildren reported engaging in *serious conversations*, *talking about problems*, and *reminiscing* more frequently than the remaining forms of everyday talk. Conversely, all three members of the stepfamily system reported engaging in *interrogation* the least frequently, followed by *lecturing* for parents and stepparents and *relationship talk* for stepchildren.

RQ2: Significant Differences in Everyday Talk for Different Stepfamily Members Stepchildren

The results of the MANCOVA for stepchildren, using relationship type (parents × stepparents × nonresidential parents) as the predictor variable, length of time since parents' divorce as the covariate, and 20 different types of everyday talk as the criterion variables, revealed a significant multivariate effect for the covariate, *Wilks'* $\lambda = .841$, $F(20, 254) = 2.40$, $p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .16$, as well as a significant multivariate main effect for relationship type, *Wilks'* $\lambda = .667$, $F(40, 508) = 2.85$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .18$. Univariate F-tests revealed that length of time since parents' divorce was positively associated with engaging in *gossip*, $F(1, 273) = 4.29$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$, *joking around*, $F(1, 273) = 4.48$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$, *catching up*, $F(1, 273) = 4.95$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$, *serious conversations*, $F(1, 273) = 9.44$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .03$, *talking about problems*, $F(1, 273) = 13.17$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$, *complaining*,

$F(1, 273) = 15.37, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$, and *asking for favors*, $F(1, 273) = 6.08, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$, with different members of the stepfamily system. Table 2 presents the remaining univariate F-tests, effect sizes, and cell comparisons for the main effect of relationship type on all 20 types of everyday talk after controlling for the covariate. As noted in the table, relationship type had a significant effect on 19 of the 20 types of everyday talk, with the general pattern reflecting greater frequencies of everyday talk with parents than with stepparents or nonresidential parents. In fact, there were only two significant differences for stepparents and nonresidential parents, with stepchildren engaging in more *small talk* with stepparents than with nonresidential parents and more *love talk* with nonresidential parents than with stepparents. The only type of everyday talk for which there were no significant differences in frequency among parents, stepparents, and nonresidential parents was *conflict*.

Table 2. Differences in Stepchildren's Reports of Everyday Talk among Stepfamily Members after Controlling for Time Since Parents' Divorce

Types of talk	Parents ^a	Stepparents ^b	Nonresidential ^c parents	$F(2, 302)$	η^2
1. Small talk	3.20	2.91	2.60	5.18**	.04
2. Gossip	3.22	2.54 _a	2.37 _a	13.64***	.09
3. Joking around	4.02	3.45 _b	3.29 _b	9.03***	.06
4. Catching up	4.12	3.33 _c	3.58 _c	8.98***	.06
5. Recapping day	3.89	2.87 _d	2.80 _d	22.10***	.14
6. Reminiscing	3.40	2.68 _e	2.91 _e	9.71***	.07
7. Making up	2.99	2.39 _f	2.29 _f	8.39***	.06
8. Love talk	3.61	2.45	2.86	18.53***	.12
9. Relationship talk	2.46	1.84 _g	2.00 _g	9.40***	.06
10. Conflict	2.78 _h	2.68 _h	2.64 _h	<i>ns</i>	
11. Serious conversation	3.64	2.66 _i	2.81 _i	19.78***	.13
12. Talking about problems	3.66	2.63 _j	2.61 _j	25.43***	.16
13. Complaining	3.52	2.55 _k	2.53 _k	25.88***	.16
14. Persuading conversation	3.17	2.31 _l	2.48 _l	16.64***	.11
15. Decision-making	3.33	2.42 _m	2.42 _m	22.79***	.14
16. Giving instructions	3.20	2.55 _n	2.41 _n	14.32***	.10
17. Lecturing	2.68	2.18 _o	2.22 _o	4.52*	.03
18. Interrogating	2.29	1.90 _p	1.88 _p	3.76*	.03
19. Making plans	3.30	2.54 _q	2.66 _q	11.64***	.08
20. Asking a favor	3.60	2.61 _r	2.59 _r	24.49***	.15

Mean frequencies based on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Regularly*). Means in rows with the same subscripts are not significantly different at $p < .05$.

a.) $n = 94$; b.) $n = 93$; c.) $n = 90$

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Parents

The results of the MANCOVA for parents, using relationship type (children × spouses × ex-spouses) as the predictor variable, length of stepfamily membership as the covariate, and 20 different types of everyday talk as the criterion variables, revealed no significant multivariate effect for the covariate, *Wilks' λ* = .910, *F*(20, 260) = 1.29, *ns*. Thus, length of stepfamily membership was dropped from further analysis and a reparameterized MANOVA revealed a significant multivariate effect for relationship type, *Wilks' λ* = .114, *F*(40, 566) = 27.80, *p* < .001, partial η^2 = .66. Table 3 presents the univariate *F*-tests, effect sizes, and cell comparisons for the main effect of relationship type on everyday talk. As noted in the table, relationship type had a significant effect on all 20 types of everyday talk, with the general pattern reflecting greater frequencies of everyday talk with current spouses (or stepparents), followed by children with less frequency, and then ex-spouses with the least frequency. For some forms of everyday talk, however, there were no significant differences in frequency among spouses (or stepparents) and children.

Table 3. Differences in Parent's Reports of Everyday Talk among Stepfamily Members

Types of talk	Children ^a	Spouses ^b (stepparents)	Ex-spouses ^c (NRPs)	<i>F</i> (2, 302)	η^2
1. Small talk	2.97	3.45	1.39	80.77**	.35
2. Gossip	2.60	3.02	1.24	86.66**	.37
3. Joking around	3.97	4.23	1.42	265.70**	.64
4. Catching up	4.23 _a	4.26 _a	1.52	290.34**	.66
5. Recapping day	3.88	4.49	1.13	482.50**	.76
6. Reminiscing	3.80 _b	3.89 _b	1.38	226.10**	.60
7. Making up	3.18	3.59	1.25	148.66**	.50
8. Love talk	4.08	4.27	1.06	387.80**	.72
9. Relationship talk	2.87	3.44	1.11	154.45**	.51
10. Conflict	2.53 _c	2.76	2.41 _c	3.21*	.02
11. Serious conversation	3.41	3.76	1.46	164.65**	.52
12. Talking about problems	3.49	3.79	1.19	250.19**	.62
13. Complaining	2.99	3.50	1.32	153.17**	.50
14. Persuading conversation	3.00 _d	3.03 _d	1.26	144.25**	.49
15. Decision-making	3.13	3.98	1.22	298.77**	.66
16. Giving instructions	3.23 _e	3.36 _e	1.25	218.09**	.59
17. Lecturing	2.39 _f	2.56 _f	1.26	63.54**	.30
18. Interrogating	2.02 _g	1.96 _g	1.16	35.02**	.19
19. Making plans	3.20 _h	3.20 _h	1.33	116.46**	.44
20. Asking a favor	3.30	3.64	1.27	209.12**	.58

Mean frequencies based on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Regularly*). Means in rows with the same subscripts are not significantly different at *p* < .05. NRPs = nonresidential parents.

a.) *n* = 104 ; b.) *n* = 108 ; c.) *n* = 93

p* < .05 ; *p* < .001

Specifically, parents reported *catching up, reminiscing, persuading, giving instructions, lecturing, interrogating, and making plans* with both spouses (or stepparents) and children approximately the same amount of time during a typical week. Again, the only type of everyday talk that differed from both the larger pattern of frequencies among all three members of the stepfamily system and the smaller pattern between spouses and children was *conflict*. Parents were only slightly more likely to engage in conflict with their spouses than with children and ex-spouses, for whom there was no significant difference.

Stepparents

The results of the MANCOVA for stepparents, using relationship type (stepchildren \times spouses \times nonresidential parents) as the predictor variable, length of stepfamily membership as the covariate, and 20 different types of everyday talk as the criterion variables, revealed no significant multivariate effect for the covariate, *Wilks' λ* = .901, *F*(20, 264) = 1.44, *ns*. Thus, length of stepfamily membership was

Table 4. Differences in Stepparent's Reports of Everyday Talk among Stepfamily Members

Types of talk	Stepchildren ^a	Spouses ^b (parents)	Nonresidential ^c parents	<i>F</i> (2, 302)	η^2
1. Small talk	2.97	3.64	1.31	113.51**	.44
2. Gossip	2.41	3.36	1.13	157.49**	.52
3. Joking around	3.71	4.34	1.20	416.25**	.74
4. Catching up	3.64	4.36	1.30	314.02**	.69
5. Recapping day	3.31	4.56	1.14	475.84**	.77
6. Reminiscing	3.10	4.07	1.15	285.70**	.67
7. Making up	2.90	3.81	1.07	243.50**	.63
8. Love talk	3.01	4.39	1.04	325.33**	.69
9. Relationship talk	2.24	3.69	1.01	265.74**	.65
10. Conflict	2.64	2.99	1.46	74.43**	.34
11. Serious conversation	2.73	3.89	1.18	256.00**	.64
12. Talking about problems	2.84	3.91	1.16	235.15**	.62
13. Complaining	2.65	3.54	1.08	205.47**	.59
14. Persuading conversation	2.63	3.22	1.07	159.14**	.53
15. Decision-making	2.55	3.96	1.05	296.21**	.67
16. Giving instructions	2.90	3.63	1.07	231.64**	.62
17. Lecturing	2.09	2.39	1.09	50.93**	.26
18. Interrogating	1.80	2.08	1.11	33.83**	.19
19. Making plans	2.47	3.47	1.09	176.60**	.55
20. Asking a favor	2.73	3.68	1.14	188.08**	.57

Mean frequencies based on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Regularly*).

a.) *n* = 96 ; b.) *n* = 99 ; c.) *n* = 96

***p* < .001

dropped from further analysis and a reparameterized MANOVA revealed a significant multivariate effect for relationship type, $Wilks' \lambda = .101$, $F(40, 538) = 28.81$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .68$. Table 4 presents the univariate F-tests, effect sizes, and cell comparisons for the main effect of relationship type on everyday talk. As noted in the table, relationship type had a significant effect on all 20 types of everyday talk, with the general pattern reflecting greater frequencies of everyday talk with current spouses (or parents), followed by stepchildren with less frequency, and then nonresidential parents with the least frequency. Unlike the trends reported for parents and stepchildren, this pattern remained consistent across all 20 types of everyday talk, and although stepparents rarely, if ever, engaged in everyday talk with nonresidential parents, when they did talk to nonresidential parents stepparents reported engaging in *conflict*, *small talk*, or *catching up* somewhat more frequently than the other forms of everyday talk (see Table 4).

Discussion

The principal goal of our research was to describe the types of everyday talk that characterize stepfamily relationships and to examine differences in frequencies of everyday talk among various stepfamily dyads. Overall, the results indicate that some forms of everyday talk occur with greater frequency than others regardless of family relationship type, and that stepfamily members engage in different types of everyday talk based on the target family member for whom they are reporting. Intriguingly, when comparing stepparent–stepchild and nonresidential parent–child relationships, only two differences in reported frequencies of everyday talk emerged, namely *small talk* and *love talk*. Likewise, the only type of talk for which stepchildren reported no significant differences in among all three adults in the stepfamily system was *conflict*. Consequently, these results not only extend previous efforts to identify and describe the types of speech events that occur in personal and familial relationships (e.g., Duck et al., 1991; Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996), but they provide a preliminary, communication-based framework for characterizing different types of stepfamily relationships.

The first research question explored the types of everyday talk that stepfamily members reported engaging in most frequently. Our results indicate that stepfamily members enact most frequently what might be considered typical, mundane forms of informal talk, including recapping the day's events, catching up, and joking around. These types of everyday talk occurred most frequently regardless of stepfamily relationship type, though parents and stepparents reported engaging in love talk and reminiscing, and stepchildren reported having serious conversations and talking about problems, more so than the remaining types of everyday talk. In previous research, Goldsmith and Baxter (1996) found that informal types of talk, such as gossip, joking around, catching up, and reminiscing, occurred most frequently across a variety of personal relationship types including parent–child and sibling relationships. Consistent with their findings, our results provide further evidence to suggest that everyday conversations and relating in stepfamily systems are enacted at

the level of the mundane. Conversely, parents and stepparents reported negative, formal types of talk such as interrogation and lecturing least frequently, whereas stepchildren reported engaging in relationship talk least frequently. As Afifi and Schrodt (2003a) noted, adolescent and young adult children in stepfamilies often avoid talking about the state of their family relationships in response to the uncertainty associated with postdivorce life. Consistent with their research, the stepchildren in our study may have avoided relationship talk with their parents, and particularly with their stepparents, in response to the relational ambiguity that emerges in postdivorce families. Nevertheless, such speculation awaits further empirical testing as it is equally likely that stepchildren engaged in relationship talk least frequently as a function of their developmental stage.

Our second research question examined whether significant differences among different types of everyday talk would emerge for different dyadic relationships within the stepfamily system. For stepchildren, our results indicate that, after controlling for the length of time since their parents' divorce, the residential parent remains the primary recipient of most forms of children's everyday talk. Specifically, stepchildren reported engaging in every form of everyday talk more frequently with their residential parents than with either their stepparents or their nonresidential parents, with one notable exception. Evidently, stepchildren reported no significant differences in frequencies of conflict with all three adults in the stepfamily system. These results are meaningful, given that conflict-related events represent one of the most important discriminators among different stepfamily developmental pathways (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Coleman et al., 2001). In fact, Schrodt (2006a, 2006b) recently found that stepfamily dissension is a key indicator of stepfamily functioning, so much so that it often becomes the foremost characteristic of some stepfamily types as it becomes normative over time. When coupled with the results from our study, then, one might suspect that conflict influences stepfamily functioning more at a family-level (or group level) of analysis than at an individual or dyadic level of analysis, though again, future research is needed to address this issue.

Perhaps a more interesting set of findings to emerge from the stepchildren in our study pertains to differences in reported everyday talk with stepparents and nonresidential parents. Contrary to what one might expect, there were only two differences in everyday talk among these two relationships, namely, that stepchildren reported engaging in more small talk with stepparents than with nonresidential parents, whereas they engaged in more love talk with nonresidential parents than with stepparents. It stands to reason that stepchildren would be more likely to engage in small talk with stepparents than with nonresidential parents based on the relational challenges, uncertainties, and ambiguities that often characterize the stepparent-stepchild relationship (cf. Afifi, 2003; Ganong et al., 1999; Golish, 2003; Golish & Caughlin, 2002; Schrodt, 2006c). On the other hand, previous researchers have demonstrated how the nonresidential parent-child relationship changes over time as a function of reduced time with children, conflict with former spouses, and career demands (e.g., Emery & Dillon, 1994), among other factors. Thus, one might

suspect that children would be more likely to engage in love talk with their nonresidential parents in an effort to maintain a parental relationship, though Braithwaite and Baxter (2006) recently found that stepchildren often express ambivalence over the parenting attempts of their nonresidential parents. Despite the two differences that emerged in everyday talk, however, it is the similarities between these two dyadic relationships that struck us as most intriguing.

To our knowledge, this study represents the first to compare similarities and differences in communication behaviors among stepparent–stepchild and nonresidential parent–child relationships. As such, our results tend to suggest that these two relationships are much more similar in terms of communication behaviors than they are different. In other words, after controlling for the effects of time, stepchildren reported no significant differences in the frequencies with which they engage in both informal and formal types of everyday talk with both adults, ranging from mundane forms of talk such as gossip, joking around, catching up, and recapping the day, to more relationally explicit forms of talk such as reminiscing, making up, relationship talk, serious conversations, talking about problems, and asking for favors. One possible explanation for these results may stem from recent research on children's feelings of being caught between their parents (e.g., Afifi, 2003; Afifi & Schrodt, 2003b; Amato & Afifi, 2006). As Amato and Afifi reasoned, children may attempt to reconcile the stress and guilt associated with triangulation in family systems by aligning themselves more with one parent (typically the residential parent) than the other. Given that the stepfamilies in the present study had been together on average for more than 10 years, it could be that the stepchildren in our study gradually reduced their everyday talk with their nonresidential parents in an effort to ameliorate the tensions associated with feeling caught. Such attempts to mitigate feelings of being caught between their parents, in turn, might have coincided with a gradual increase in everyday talk with their stepparents as they continued to reduce uncertainty and develop their stepparent–stepchild relationship. When combined, both trends might provide a more complete explanation for why very few differences in everyday talk among these two dyadic relationships emerged in this study, though future research is needed to test such speculation. On the other hand, these results may simply be a function of stepchildren's attempts to adapt communicatively to their circumstances as they navigate a complex web of relationships with the different adults in their lives (Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001).

Contrary to the trends for stepchildren, our results suggest that residential parents and stepparents evidence similar patterns of everyday talk with each other and with other members of the stepfamily system, though a few differences emerged. For example, the general trend among different types of everyday talk for parents and stepparents reflected a central focus on the remarried relationship, more so than on either (step)parent–child relationship, though both adults engaged in more everyday talk with stepchildren than with nonresidential parents. This trend was consistent for stepparents across all 20 types of everyday talk, whereas for residential parents there were several types of talk for which there were no significant differences between stepparents (or spouses) and children. Specifically, residential parents were

equally likely to catch up, reminisce, persuade, give instructions, lecture, interrogate, and make plans with both their spouses and their children. Underlying these types of everyday talk is the general “business” of everyday stepfamily life, as parents, stepparents, and children coordinate shared activities and function as a collective. Interestingly, stepparents and parents were only slightly more likely to enact conflict with each other than other members of the stepfamily system, though residential parents were equally likely to engage in conflict with both their own children and their ex-spouses (i.e., nonresidential parents). When coupled with the results for stepchildren, then, these results provide a clearer picture of the types of talk that differentiate relational dyads within the stepfamily system.

Overall, then, the results of our investigation provide a preliminary, communication-based framework for understanding and differentiating dyadic relationships within stepfamily systems. Despite these contributions, however, the results should be interpreted within the limitations of the research design. For example, most of the previous research on everyday talk in personal relationships has relied almost exclusively on diary logs, due in part to the limitations associated with self-report measures. In the absence of a more formal measure of everyday talk and given our interest in examining frequencies of everyday talk, we relied on behavioral indicators of everyday talk that corresponded with Goldsmith and Baxter’s (1996) theoretical taxonomy. Despite this decision, however, one might question the extent to which such self-reported frequencies of everyday talk correspond (and therefore, are accurate) with *enacted* everyday talk based on observation.

In addition, we relied on purposive sampling techniques and although we gathered multiple perspectives from several different families in different parts of the country, we nevertheless had a predominantly White, college-educated group of families. Future researchers might address these limitations by combining the use of diaries (cf. Braithwaite et al., 2003; Duck et al., 1991; Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996) with actual, in-home observations to chart the contextual use of everyday talk in situated interactions. At the same time, future researchers might also examine similar associations among different types of everyday talk in other family forms, such as first-marriage families, and then compare the patterns of associations observed here across family contexts. Through these types of investigations, scholars can continue to chart the communication processes that characterize (step)family relationships and further our understanding of the messages that facilitate healthier, more satisfying (step)family relationships.

Note

- [1] We acknowledge that including multiple family members in a single data set introduces a degree of nonindependence in statistical analyses. However, we did not have a round-robin design in which each person completes the same report for every other member of the group. Although there were three targets for each family member, there were four options across the data set (i.e., child, parent, stepparent, and nonresidential parent), which arbitrarily created missing data that would prevent a mixed-model MANCOVA analysis. Further, we were unable to include nonresidential parents’ reports of their everyday talk with the other

three members of the stepfamily system, again preventing the types of statistical analyses that are more appropriate for round-robin designs (e.g., social relations modeling). Consequently, we chose to focus this report on differences among dyadic relationships within the stepfamily system treating all members occupying each stepfamily role as a separate group.

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