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“You’re My Parent but You’re Not”: Dialectical Tensions in Stepchildren’s Perceptions about Communicating with the Nonresidential Parent

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Abstract

The nonresidential parent plays a role in the lives of stepchildren and in stepfamily households. The focus of the present study was on the interaction between the nonresidential parent and his/her child who resides as part of a stepfamily household. Grounded in relational dialectics theory, the researchers performed an interpretive analysis of 50 transcribed interviews with college-aged stepchildren. Stepchildren’s perceptions of communication with the nonresidential parent were animated by two contradictions: parenting/nonparenting and openness/closedness. These two contradictions form a totality, interwoven with one another. The parenting/nonparenting contradiction reflected stepchildren’s ambivalence over parenting attempts of nonresidential parents. Stepchildren wanted nonresidential parent involvement and parenting, and at the same time they resisted it, often finding communication to be awkward and challenging. In addition, stepchildren wanted open and intimate communication with their nonresidential parents, yet they found openness to be problematic and managed these contradictory demands via segmentation. Implications of these findings are discussed, along with insights to guide professionals working with stepfamilies and adults co-parenting children to better understand and interact in ways that promote healthy stepfamilies.

Keywords: family communication, nonresidential parent, dialectical tensions

When asked to picture a stepfamily, most will think about a household comprising the parent, stepparent, stepchildren, and perhaps children from the new relationship, in other words a household that approximates a first-marriage family. Adopting this view of a stepfamily focuses on communication among the family members *inside* the boundary of the

stepfamily household, and does not focus on the interaction and relationships with family members *outside* of a single stepfamily boundary, e.g., nonresidential parents, their partners, and extended family members. Communication with these “outside” family members can be challenging for stepfamily members. For example, a nationally syndicated advice column included a letter from a woman who was very uncomfortable that her partner and his children would regularly go and dine with the ex-spouse/children’s nonresidential parent (“Annie’s mailbox,” 2004).

Issues surrounding the complexities of “outside” stepfamily relationships, especially with the nonresidential parent, appear frequently in forums such as this. In the FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) section of its website, the Stepfamily Association of America, the largest lay organization of stepfamily members, features questions from stepfamily members on how to deal with multiple households and nonresidential parents (Stepfamily Association of America Frequently Asked Questions [FAQs], n.d.). Ganong and Coleman (2004) reviewed the clinical literature and stressed that most stepfamilies need education to help them address the complexities of stepfamily relationships both inside and outside the single stepfamily household. Researchers have also stressed the need to move the focus on stepfamilies beyond the walls of a single household (e.g., Afifi, 2003; Braithwaite, McBride, & Schrodt, 2003; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000), yet few have made this move in their research.

Our work in the present project was an attempt to answer this call and was guided by three goals. The first goal was to study communication in stepfamilies in multiple households by focusing on interaction involving the nonresidential parent. We use the term “nonresidential parent” to refer to a parent who does not live with his or her child(ren) all or most of the time. The nonresidential parent potentially affects all members of a stepfamily household, and Ganong and Coleman (2004) stressed that the “nonresidential parent is an important factor in stepfamily relationships” (p. 198). To the remarried couple, the nonresidential parent is a third adult whose presence (and absence) influences the couple’s efforts to parent the household’s children. To the child, the nonresidential parent is a presence-and-absence that shadows the relationship with the residential parent and the relationship with the stepparent (Braithwaite, Schrodt, & Baxter, 2006). At a minimum, the child carries memories of the relationship with the nonresidential parent that can provide a comparison point against which the residential parent and the stepparent are judged (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). The nonresidential parent thus holds an important place in stepfamilies, potentially impacting all other relationships in a stepfamily household.

The nonresidential parent may or may not have custody; even in joint custody situations, most children reside primarily with one parent, thereby positioning the second parent as the nonresidential one (Bray & Depner, 1993; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). While some nonresidential parents are mothers, approximately 90% of nonresidential parents are fathers, and virtually all the research on nonresidential parenting concerns fathers (Bray & Depner, 1993; Ganong & Coleman, 1994, 2004). Scholars have identified relationships with the nonresidential parent as understudied in the stepfamily literature and of potential importance to stepfamily life (Braver, Wolchik, Sandler, & Sheets, 1993; Coleman et al., 2000; Ganong & Coleman, 2004), which provided an impetus for us to focus on communication and nonresidential parenting in the present study.

Much of the research on nonresidential parenting mirrors stepfamily research in general by focusing on the perspectives of the adults. Researchers have identified challenges facing the nonresidential parents, such as reduced time with children, conflict with the former partner, changes in parental identity, career demands, inconvenient visitation schedules, and their own dating or new family commitments (Braver et al., 1993; Emery & Dillon, 1994; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002; Wallerstein & Corbin, 1986). Emery and Dillon (1994) described hurried visits of nonresidential parents with their children, "often designed to maximize fun, as nonresidential parents understandably attempt to ensure that they have a good relationship with their children" (p. 377). However, there is little information on how children envision their interaction with their nonresidential parent, the parenting they receive, or what challenges children may themselves experience as they attempt to have a relationship with their nonresidential parent at the same time as they are part of a stepfamily. Several scholars have argued for more research from the perspective of children (e.g., Amato, 1994; Coleman et al., 2000; Dunn, Davies, O'Connor, & Sturgess, 2001; Esposito, 1995; Mullett & Stolberg, 1999; Whiteside, 1998), which we addressed in the present study.

Although the interaction of nonresidential parents has received limited research attention, scholars have discovered that children's contact with their nonresidential parent appears to decrease upon separation and divorce in most cases, sometimes dramatically (Emery & Dillon, 1994). While it may seem intuitively obvious that communication between children and their nonresidential parent should be encouraged, the limited research on nonresidential parenting has resulted in conflicting findings (Emery, 1999; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Ganong and Coleman (2004) argued for examining the relationship between nonresidential parents and their children as a key to understanding stepfamilies, stressing that "research on the maintenance and enhancement of nonresidential parent-child relationships after remarriage or repartnering of one or both parents is lacking" (p. 119). Therefore, our second goal in the present study was to focus on the perspective of college-aged children in stepfamilies regarding interaction with their nonresidential parent.

In existing work on nonresidential parenting, scholars have emphasized the critical early stages post-divorce, before a stepfamily may have formed (e.g., Afifi & McManus, 2006). While interaction between the residential and nonresidential parent has the potential to be difficult after the divorce, things may grow worse after the addition of a stepparent to the family (Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001). Further, because more stepfamily researchers emphasize the formative stages of stepfamily development, more established stepfamilies have been understudied (Golish, 2003). Thus, our third goal in the present project was to study communication of nonresidential parents and children during the stepfamily stage. To that end, we examined perceptions of communication with nonresidential parents among college-aged children in established stepfamilies.

We employed relational dialectics theory (Baxter, 2004; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) as a heuristic framework, consistent with the study's interpretive methods. In interpretive work, theory is not used to derive testable hypotheses, but rather functions to assist the researcher in "thinking in advance about potentially relevant concepts" (Lindlof & Taylor,

2002, p. 69). Baxter (2006) argued that a relational dialectics perspective is particularly fitting for studying family interaction as families appear to “gain their meanings from the give-and-take interplay of multiple, competing themes or perspectives” (p. 131). Central to the relational dialectics perspective is a commitment to understand salient contradictions, simultaneously united-yet-opposed themes (Baxter, 2004, 2006; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). From this vantage point, the scholarly task is that of identifying the situated contradictions that animate the communication of relational parties (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

Several scholars have employed relational dialectics to study the complexities of stepfamily life. In particular, researchers have examined the parent-stepparent-child triangle (e.g., Afifi, 2003; Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990), the stepparent-child relationship (e.g., Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004), and stepfamily rituals (e.g., Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998). However, dialectically based work on the nonresidential parent-child relationship is very limited. Afifi and Keith (2004) called for scholars to pay attention to the ambiguous loss experienced by children in post-divorce families with respect to their nonresidential parent. Ambiguous loss is, in essence, a contradictory experience in which the nonresidential parent is at once both present and absent. However, we do not know if this ambiguous loss persists in established stepfamilies. Afifi (2003) reported that about half of her sample of young-adult children felt caught in the middle of divided loyalties as they sought to manage disclosures between residential and nonresidential parents. However, her sample consisted of relatively young stepfamilies whose average duration was five years. She noted that the “feeling caught” pattern likely depended on how long a stepfamily had been formed, yet we have no way of discerning from her study whether such “feeling caught” feelings are characteristic of more established stepfamilies. A number of researchers have noted that the first three to five years of stepfamily life are often turbulent as a stepfamily forms (e.g., Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Hetherington, 1999).

Although dialectical scholars have repeatedly identified several general families of contradiction that animate communication across many relationships (for a review see Baxter, 2004, 2006; Baxter & Braithwaite, in press), relational dialectics theory emphasizes that meaning is locally situated and that abstract contradictions are often etched differently depending on the particular relationship type (Baxter, 2004). Baxter (2006) cautioned scholars to “resist the temptation to view variations in the labels for contradictions as mere synonyms of one another” (p. 136). Rather, relational dialectics emphasizes the importance of studying contradictions as they are locally situated.

In summary, existing research on stepfamilies has tended to focus on relationships within a single stepfamily household in its early formative stages and has most often taken the perspective of the adults in these families. In the present study, we sought to focus on contradictions children and their nonresidential parents experience, and used relational dialectics theory with the goal of understanding the dialectical complexity of communication in these relationships. Thus, the research question guiding this study was as follows: What contradictions, if any, are perceived by college-aged stepchildren to characterize communication with their nonresidential parent?

Method

Following the precedent of dialectically based studies of stepfamily life just discussed, we positioned our study in the interpretive paradigm. Qualitative/interpretive researchers focus on questions of meaning from the "native's point of view" rather than soliciting participant responses in researcher-defined terms (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Bochner, 1985). Further, they seek intelligibility and understanding by identifying the similarities in meanings that phenomena or processes hold for the informants (Bochner, 1985; Creswell, 1998; Leininger, 1994).

Participants

Fifty college-aged stepchildren at two large Midwestern universities volunteered to be interviewed about communication in their stepfamilies in exchange for extra credit in undergraduate communication courses. The mean age of the 33 females and 17 males was 21.0 years ($SD = 1.70$ years). The sample was 94% Caucasian, and the remainder was African American. The mean duration of participants' stepfamilies was 11.9 years ($SD = 4.3$ years). If a participant indicated membership in multiple stepfamilies, he or she was asked to talk about the stepfamily in which the majority of time was spent. A total of 31 participants reported on nonresidential father relationships, and 19 reported on nonresidential mother relationships.

Data Collection Procedures

Interviewers and college-aged stepchildren participated in semi-structured, focused interviews. The two authors trained four graduate-student interviewers. The interviewers used an interview guide but also had the freedom to pursue other relevant topics that arose (McCracken, 1988). Participants were assured of their confidentiality, consistent with institutional policies to protect human subjects. The interviews lasted approximately one hour each. Interviewers asked and received permission to audiotape record the interviews. These tapes were transcribed for the purpose of analysis, resulting in 802 pages of text.

Participants provided the researchers with demographic information about their stepfamily, including how and when the stepfamily was formed, and they completed a demographic family tree to describe the composition of the stepfamily. The interviewers and participants then discussed current communication in their stepfamily as a whole and with the different members of their stepfamily. Participants were first asked to tell a story about a typical communication event in their stepfamily and discussed that narrative with the interviewer. Participants then reflected on the positive and the challenging aspects of communication in the stepfamily as a whole and separately with each member of their stepfamily, including the nonresidential parent. In the present study, we focused on the participants' perspective on their relationship with their nonresidential parent. Theoretical saturation (Creswell, 1998; Leininger, 1994) was achieved after 36 transcripts had been analyzed and no new themes were identified; however, we continued to analyze all 50 transcripts in order to maximize the validity of our interpretations.

Data Analysis

Analytic coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) was used to identify perceived contradictions in stepchild–nonresidential parent communication. The researchers began analytic coding by reading through all of the transcripts several times in order to gain familiarity with the data set as a whole. Analytic coding involves deriving codes and categories to capture major themes of relevance to the study. This inductive process involved two stages of analysis. In the first stage, analytic coding was organized around Spradley's (1979) Attribution semantic relationship "X is an attribute (characteristic) of Y" (p. 111). A semantic relationship is a way in which meaning is constituted. In part, the meaning of something rests with our understanding of its attributes or characteristics. We focused, in particular, on two Attribution-based semantic relationships: the characteristics of positive communication with the nonresidential parent and the characteristics of challenging communication with the nonresidential parent. Analytic coding is an inductive process in which a given datum is compared to prior data for its similarity or difference. Each time a datum is perceived as different from prior data, a new coding category is added. Analytic coding is iterative, as coding categories are added, combined, and revised in an emergent manner until the coding categories as a set do not require further modification with additional cases.

The second-stage analytic task was finding connections among the coded categories, using the transcript as our unit of analysis. Our analysis was oriented around Spradley's (1979) semantic relationship of Strict Inclusion, "X is a kind of Y," where "contradiction" became the "Y" (p. 111). In part, the meaning of something involves a determination of what counts as an instance of it. In this second stage, we identified simultaneous opposites in our participants' talk. For example, during stage-one analytic coding, one category identified for positive communication was expression or revealing with the nonresidential parent, and another category was nonexpression or closedness. We noted that a participant's simultaneous openness with and closedness with the nonresidential parent was a contradiction, leading us to posit the "openness/closedness" contradiction in these data. The identification of kinds of contradictions was an inductive and iterative process. This process was exhaustive in identifying all of the salient contradictions in the data set. Themes from stage-one coding that were not dialectical were dropped from further analysis.

The two researchers independently conducted analytic coding, triangulating their analyses through discussion at the conclusion of their coding and identifying representative exemplars for the research report. Differences were minor, largely due to labeling choices rather than conceptual choices, and were resolved during discussion. Last, the researchers rechecked the analysis to ensure the consistency of the categories and to search for rival interpretations of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results

Communication between stepchildren and their respective nonresidential parents was animated by two contradictions that appeared in the transcripts for both nonresidential fathers and nonresidential mothers. The first contradiction revolves around parenting issues, and the second contradiction involves issues of expression.

Contradiction #1: Parenting and Not Parenting

On the one hand, our sample of college-aged stepchildren reported that they wanted their nonresidential parent to be actively involved in parenting them. At the same time, however, when the nonresidential parent tried to parent, the stepchildren did not desire it. As a consequence of this unity of oppositions—wanting and not wanting parenting—parent-child communication between the stepchild and his or her nonresidential parent was perceived as an effortful and ongoing challenge.

For some of the stepchildren, the nonresidential parent assumed the role of a friend or “buddy” rather than the parent role they wanted and expected. A male participant echoed this theme in criticizing his nonresidential parent:

P: The challenge [with my father], I guess, he was always just more of a friend I guess to some extent.

I: But you didn’t perceive his friendship as a positive?

P: No, because he’s supposed to be, like, a father. I mean when you talk to him there’s not a lot of emotional stuff there, it’s just being like, “Hey, how’s the weather?” That’s like, I’m using friend I guess in a loose, kind of impersonal sense, like you knew somebody for five days and you’d call them a friend. (#6, ll. 293–311)

This participant, like others in our sample, wanted the nonresident parent to function as a parent, not as a friend.

At the same time that our stepchildren mourned the absence of parenting by the nonresidential parent, they also experienced enormous emotional ambivalence. Such ambivalence is painfully captured in this female participant’s reflections about her relationship with her nonresidential father:

I hardly ever really talk to my father about anything besides just like the bare bones of like what’s going on like at college right now or anything ‘cause I have probably seen my father maybe I don’t know once or maybe twice a year like at that, so every time I do see him I feel like it’s he’s like a total stranger almost and it’s like I really don’t know what to say or just ‘cause he doesn’t really know what’s going on in my life. It’s kind of a struggle knowing whether it’s like whether I get down on myself and I should try more to see him but then also to think like why doesn’t he try to talk or see me, so it’s like a struggle I’ve been going through lately. I’ve been working out in my head almost. It’s really really hard like a tug of war in my brain. . . . It’s been going on for a while, and I’ve been trying to push it out trying to do something about it, but it’s just so easy to just hide behind like school and work lately because that’s been keeping me busy. And like different organizations I’m in like make myself busy in that and then I don’t have to deal with it and it’s something I think I should do but it’s just, I don’t know, I’ve been avoiding it too much. (#19, ll. 209–226)

On the one hand, this participant expressed to us her anger or sadness directed at her father who, in her view, isn't trying hard enough to reach out to her. On the other hand, however, this participant recognized that she had mixed feelings herself about reaching out to him.

Our participants expressed a variety of reasons why they did not embrace close parenting from the nonresidential parent, at the same time that they longed for such engagement. Some participants experienced contact from the nonresidential parent as too disruptive of their day-to-day lives. One female participant expressed this sense of disruption in the following way in describing communication with her nonresidential father:

When he'd call—he wasn't in the house—so it was like at that point when someone's available to you, you can talk whenever you want and when it's good for you and when it's good for the other person. But when you're trying to have communication with a parent like that when they're not in the house, it's like I could be watching my favorite TV show and he'd call and right there communication for the day would be shot because I wasn't interested in talking with him at that time. And I could call him when he just got home from work and he was trying to eat dinner. So I think the timing in that is not good and because you're worried about other things and it throws the open line of communication off. (#3, ll. 321–330)

To this participant, the nonresidential father called at times inconvenient to her needs and interests, and this disruption created a communication barrier between them. Such disruption was not intentional nor was it one way, but it was problematic nonetheless.

Other participants did not welcome close parenting from the nonresidential parent because it resulted in conflicts, particularly with the stepparent. One female participant shared this story with us:

Well, my biological mother, she's very, she's very empathetic and she's, well, she's kind of, I don't know, she heard stuff that's happening with us. She'll try everything she can to make it better like sometimes she goes a little too far, you know, like she, like with my stepmom. I remember a big fight that they'd had when I was younger and I was telling my mom about some things that were bothering me about my stepmom and, um, she called up my dad at my step grandparents' house or something and talked to [my stepmom]. She said she was, pardon my language, that she was acting like a bitch. . . . I thought my mom was just protecting us and at the same time, I was like, that's kind of far to take it. (#4, ll. 202–209)

To some participants, parenting by the nonresidential parent was framed as "protection," but such interventions often turned out to produce even more problems in the stepfamily.

Other participants experienced divided loyalties between the nonresidential parent and the parental system consisting of the residential parent and the stepparent. When the nonresidential parent engaged in active parenting, the stepchild found himself or herself caught between these dual loyalties. One female participant expressed this feeling of being

emotionally caught between loyalty to her biological mother and loyalty to her father and her stepmother, Evelyn:

I think her [the nonresidential mother's] relationship with my dad was probably the most difficult part. It was so negative and sometimes she would open up a lot of negative feelings on her part that she would share with us. And that was really difficult to take. And then sometimes we'd get into, "Oh this is what Evelyn does." So it kind of became a you and her type of thing. That was really difficult and I remember feeling really split sometimes. Like it wasn't OK to love them, and that was very hard, you know. . . . Because I enjoyed [the stepfamily]; it felt complete being with them all the time. (#14, ll. 179–185)

This participant felt "split" between loyalty to her nonresidential mother and her new stepfamily, which she enjoyed and loved. The nonresidential parent was viewed as a wedge that came between her and her new "complete" stepfamily life.

Other participants did not embrace close parenting from the nonresidential parent because they viewed the nonresidential parent as siding with the residential parent and the stepparent, thereby strengthening the adult coalition against the child. One of our female participants told us that she welcomed parenting from her nonresidential parent at first because he often took her side. However, things had changed:

P: He [the nonresidential father] started agreeing with my stepfather, and I was mad. I would get mad and my father is hard, like, he's hard headed, and so we really have challenges now. . . . [He says now] "What are you talking about? This isn't a problem, you just need to go talk to him [the stepfather]." And I'm like, "No, you need to call him and tell him this, this, and this." And it's a challenge now because he won't do that because he's like, "You're wrong and this is how it's going to be."

I: Do you know why there was that change?

P: Um, I think because he thinks I'm growing up now . . . and don't have to have my little way with "I want my dad" and always complaining to my mom "I don't want to live here; I want to stay with my dad." (#13, ll. 290–307)

This participant didn't welcome parenting from her nonresidential parent when its outcome was siding with the stepfather and mother. This participant longed for parenting as advocacy against the mother and stepfather.

To summarize, our stepchild participants felt ambivalence that resulted from a contradiction between parenting and nonparenting by the nonresidential parent. On the one hand, stepchildren longed for active parental involvement with their nonresidential mother or father, and they were saddened or angered when they perceived it to be absent. At the same time, however, they were unhappy with such involvement. Animated by this contradiction, communication between the stepchild and his or her nonresidential parent was challenging and problematic.

Yoked closely to this first contradiction of parenting and nonparenting is the second contradiction of openness and closedness. In fact, stepchildren often attempted to manage parenting from their nonresidential parent by carefully negotiating the openness and closedness of their communication with the nonresidential parent.

Contradiction #2: Openness and Closedness

On the one hand, our stepchild participants wanted open and intimate communication with their nonresidential parents; openness was viewed as the communicative glue with which a close parent-child bond could be built and sustained. One male participant conveyed this reasoning to us in his description of his relationship with his nonresidential father:

Like the times that I'm there to visit we don't talk as much as like when we're forced to communicate. It's just kind of like we go do things together or we're there spending time together, but we're not necessarily talking and having conversation and stuff like that. We don't understand each other a lot of times, like we talk but, um, we don't get it, what the other one's trying to say. . . . Since I don't live with him, it's hard for him to understand what's going on in my life and he really, really wants to be a part of it and I try, but he's not there and it's hard because he doesn't understand, he doesn't see it. . . . He doesn't know, you know, what to bring up and what I don't want to talk about and stuff like that, you know, what are like the touchy subjects with me and then, so he doesn't really know, like he knows certain things to talk about and then we end up talking about the same things over and over again because he doesn't know what else to bring up. (#7, ll. 259–301)

The understanding barrier surfaced repeatedly in our transcripts. What follows is an alternative statement of the same theme, provided by one of our female participants with reference to her nonresidential father. She provides us with the contrast point of her stepfather, Tom:

He's been there for us and he always will be, but it's really hard when you don't live with somebody, you know? And even that, like sometimes I feel more comfortable talking with my stepdad than I do with my dad. . . . Since my dad hasn't lived with us, he doesn't, I mean, I know he knows who I am, but sometimes I feel like he doesn't, you know, know what I'm saying. Because you change when you grow older so, I guess that would be a big challenge, like him trying to figure out who we are and what we want and um, since Tom [stepdad] has lived in the house for a couple of years, he knows our personalities pretty well. He knows when we get upset and stuff and he knows, um, when we're in good moods and stuff. . . . My dad doesn't have that kind of knowledge because he's not around. And I'm sure it is going to be different with my sister Judy because she does live with my dad and you know, they know each other. (#9, ll. 389–409)

The barrier to a close nonresidential parent–child relationship, according to these and many of our participants, is the lack of familiarity that parent has with the child’s everyday life. This, in turn, produces a lack of understanding on the nonresidential parent’s part. Short of living in the same household, which was not an option because of the stepfamily, open communication was perceived as a desirable solution, potentially filling the void by providing at least some familiarity and understanding.

At the same time, however, our participants experienced openness as problematic for a variety of reasons. Their most common praxical response, that is, the way they managed the contradictory demands of openness and closedness, was what Baxter and Montgomery (1996) referred to as segmentation. Segmentation manages contradiction by segmenting topic domains: openness about some topics and closedness about other topics. Our participants tried to sustain a communicative exchange with the nonresidential parent that was limited to relatively “safe topics”; “unsafe topics” were those that involved the residential parent, the stepparent, and daily life in the stepfamily household.

Some participants expressed hesitation in discussing the residential parent, and stepfamily life in general, because they feared hurting the feelings of the nonresidential parent. Here’s what one female participant had to say about hurting her nonresidential mother:

I think there, you can’t tell her certain things like if you go out and have like a lot of fun and like doing something because she doesn’t make near as much as what my dad does. . . . My dad has been in the game for a long time and he makes beaucoup bucks and, um, so he can do certain things she can’t do . . . he’ll take us on these extravagant like, these big ski trip weekends and stuff like that. . . . So telling her about these trips that we’d ever take, I know, it makes her feel bad so I can’t talk to her about these things. . . . Um, other things, pretty much any of the good sides of having a stepfamily, I don’t tell her about just ‘cause I’m not sure she can handle it. . . . It’s not that she’s bitter but it’s like . . . I filter a lot of stuff. . . . She is one of the best communicators I know. She is really really easy to talk to. I talk to her about a lot of stuff. There are certain things or subjects you just can’t talk about. (#4, ll. 355–380)

Often the source of the anticipated hurt was not the general happiness afforded the child by stepfamily life but more particularly the relationship with the stepparent. Many participants did not talk to the nonresidential parent about the positive relationship they had with their stepparent because they anticipated that it could cause hurt to the nonresidential parent. One female participant discussed the care she needs to display with reference to her word choices:

We talk on the phone like two or three times a week, but I don’t get to see him very much so that kinda puts constraints on our communication. But, if I am talking about things I will say, “Oh, my parents . . .” meaning my mom and my stepdad, but really, he’s my parent, too. I think that throws him for a loop. (#20, ll. 105–108)

Some participants tried not to discuss positive times with the stepparent because they anticipated a reaction of jealousy from the nonresidential parent. As one male participant stated with respect to his nonresidential mother:

I think she was worried that I would start liking Pam [the stepmother] more than her and take her on as a mom, because if I would be with my dad and Pam, my mom would be all weird on me. . . . I think it came down to that she was jealous that we would like Pam, 'cuz she acted like a buddy, or whatever. And she thought we'd like her more, and there's the competition. (#18, ll. 130–134)

Several of our participants did not want to discuss stepfamily life with the nonresidential parent because they perceived that this would anger the residential parent. One female participant told us this story about communicating with her nonresidential father:

I had to hide a lot of stuff from him because there was a lot of bad stuff going on at my house. . . . Like with my stepdad moving out all the time because he was an alcoholic. . . . We couldn't really talk about it. If he, like for example, they got into a huge fight and he left, I am obviously upset about something but I can't really tell my dad why I am upset because my mom doesn't want me to talk about it. I just had to be kinda like, "How are things at home?" "Well, they're fine" [laugh]. That was hard because my mom would get really upset if I told him. (#23, ll. 137–150)

Related, participants tried very hard not to discuss stepfamily life with the nonresidential parent because they felt caught in the middle of conflict between residential and nonresidential parents. One male participant described this feeling with reference to his nonresidential mother:

She [the nonresidential mother] wasn't adult enough to handle the fact that she had screwed up her marriage. . . . She couldn't handle [my dad's] remarriage and tried to use us kids to get back at [my dad and my stepmother], try to learn information. She tried to use us as tools to learn information. (#24, ll. 349–356)

Although he held his mother responsible, this participant did not want to be used as a tool in the middle of continuing tension between his parents.

In sum, our participants reported feeling torn about open communication with their nonresidential parents. On the one hand, they wanted total openness because it would alleviate the knowledge gap that characterized their relationship with that parent. On the other hand, however, they perceived risks in such openness—risks of hurt, jealousy, anger, and manipulation. Overwhelmingly, our participants reported that they negotiated the dialectical tension of openness and closedness by a response of segmentation. That is, they were closed about topics related to the residential parent, the stepparent, and stepfamily life, yet they were more open about other topics.

Discussion

In their summary article on the last decade of stepfamily research, Coleman et al. (2000) argued that scholars had a distorted sense of stepfamily dynamics because they treated stepfamily households as if they were unaffected by family members not sharing a residence full time. Responding to this challenge and the call to highlight the stepchildren's perspective in established stepfamilies, we adopted a relational dialectics perspective in the present study to focus on contradictions that were perceived by college-aged stepchildren to characterize communication with their nonresidential parents. We found that perceptions of communication were animated by two contradictions: parenting and nonparenting as well as openness and closedness. We will discuss the implications of these findings for scholars and those professionals working with stepfamilies.

The first contradiction we identified, parenting and nonparenting, bears a family resemblance to the cluster of situated contradictions subsumed under the supradialectic of integration-separation (Baxter & Braithwaite, in press). However, true to the goal of relational dialectics theory, it is important to appreciate how the integration-separation dialectical struggle is etched in the particularities of a given relationship, in this instance between the nonresidential parent and his or her college-aged child who resided in a stepfamily household. Our participants wanted a close, parental relationship with their nonresidential parent, but they experienced dialectical tension grounded in four concerns: a perception that nonresidential parenting was disruptive to their everyday lives, anticipated conflict between the nonresidential parent and the stepparent, divided loyalties between the nonresidential parent and the stepfamily, and fear of an all-adult coalition of co-parents.

Many of these stepchildren found that maintaining a relationship with their nonresidential parent was effortful. The stepchildren described instances when their parent would call or want contact at inopportune times for them. Further, our participants recognized that they often wanted parenting at times when it was not possible or convenient for their parent. Given the limited time many nonresidential parents have to spend with their children (Braver et al., 1993), it is not surprising that our participants experienced problems with timing of contact. Existing research on the nonresidential parent-child relationship has tended to emphasize the quantity of contact related to a variety of child outcomes (e.g., Dudley, 1991; Emery, 1999; Emery & Dillon, 1994; Esposito, 1995; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Stone & McKenry, 1998). The implications of our findings also point to problems of timing, not just the total quantity of time.

Even when the nonresidential parent tried to foster a relationship and actively parent them, college-aged stepchildren in the present study reported that these efforts were often hampered by the fact that the parent did not know them or the circumstances of their lives well enough to enact this role effectively. These stepchildren perceived that, many times, their nonresidential parent coped with the parenting contradiction by withdrawing or keeping the interactions focused on having a good time, rather than parenting. This may account for what some children describe as "fun dad" visits where the nonresidential parent focuses on recreation over parenting as a way to foster a positive relationship with his or her child (Emery & Dillon, 1994). The implications of our findings point to the significance of the quality of contact with the nonresidential parent in addition to its timing. But

problems of timing and quality of contact are not easily resolvable, given the dialectical experience of our participants. Our participants reported that they often embraced the freedom afforded by nonparenting from the nonresidential parent. When nonresidential parenting occurred, it was perceived to be disruptive to the stepchild's everyday life, and disruptive as well to stepfamily relations with the residential parent and with the stepparent.

The second contradiction we identified, openness/closedness, bears a family resemblance to the general cluster of contradictions subsumed under the supra-contradiction of expression-nonexpression (Baxter & Braithwaite, in press). However, it is important to appreciate the local particularities of this abstract supra-contradiction. The openness/closedness contradiction was closely connected to the parenting and nonparenting contradiction. Stepchildren often attempted to respond to parenting from their nonresidential parent by carefully negotiating the openness and closedness in their communication with the nonresidential parent. On the one hand, these stepchild participants wanted open and intimate communication with their nonresidential parents to be able to sustain a relationship with them. At the same time, these stepchildren described openness as problematic and managed the contradictory demands of openness and closedness via segmentation (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), that is, by being open about some topics and closed about others. Our participants differentiated between those topics that were safe to discuss with their nonresidential parent, often surface issues, and those topics they perceived as unsafe, avoiding or limiting discussions about the residential parent, the stepparent, or life in the stepfamily household.

Unfortunately, since the topic domains of the nonresidential parent, the stepparent, and stepfamily life were central to the day-to-day lives of our stepchild participants, failure to discuss them with the nonresidential parent made it difficult for these stepchildren to build and sustain a close parent-child bond characterized by active parental involvement by the nonresidential parent. In this sense, the two contradictions of parenting/nonparenting and openness/closedness form a totality, or knot of interdependence (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Praxical responses to the openness/closedness contradiction held implications for the parenting/nonparenting contradiction as well. In practicing closedness on issues relevant to their day-to-day stepfamily lives, our participants limited a close parenting bond with their nonresidential parent. On the other hand, when practicing openness with the nonresidential parent, these young-adult stepchildren jeopardized autonomy from nonresidential parenting. In short, our participants often experienced themselves caught in a communication web with no straightforward resolution. They wallowed in a dialectical snare of presence-and-absence; the nonresidential parent was experienced as a parental loss in their lives at the same time that this person's ongoing presence is regarded as problematic.

Afifi (2003) pondered whether her young-adult stepchildren's reports of "feeling caught" by how much to disclose with the nonresidential parent and with the residential parent was the result of the divided-loyalty turbulence that often accompanies early stepfamily formative years. The results of our study suggest that dialectical struggles with the nonresidential parent are evident even in established stepfamilies. Although some of our participants reported a dialectical struggle of expression in which the issue was one of

divided loyalties between the residential and the nonresidential parent, dialectical struggle was as, if not more, likely to involve the stepparent and stepfamily life in general. In established stepfamilies, unlike forming stepfamilies, the stepchildren face loyalties to the stepparent and to the stepfamily home they have formed over the years with fellow stepfamily members, including but not limited to the residential parent.

As with any study, there are limitations to the present work. First, we interviewed only young-adult stepchildren in the present study, and all of the participants came from different families. We do recognize the need for research that solicits both adult and stepchild perceptions from the same stepfamilies, and that research is underway. We would like to have the perspectives of residential and nonresidential parents, along with those of their children. This would help us see if adults and stepchildren agree on the dialectical tensions that organize their family experience. In addition, the young-adult stepchildren were from a college population, and we hope to find ways to include young-adult stepchildren who are not college educated as well. Second, we did not collect data designed to compare systematically different nonresidential parenting experiences, for example how often these young-adult stepchildren interacted with their parents and how, if at all, these patterns change as stepchildren age and circumstances change. We believe that larger-sample quantitative studies will likely be the best way to accomplish this goal. Finally, we recognize the limitations of a mostly white and middle-class sample, which reflects the demographics of the geographic locations in which data were gathered. Researchers need to make a greater effort to include a wider diversity of families in their stepfamily studies. While the research on communication and nonresidential parenting is in its early stages, clearly this is an important topic for communication researchers and practitioners working with stepfamilies to consider and continue to explore.

Practical Applications

The criterion of transferability is one primary way to judge the practical value of qualitative research, that is, the extent to which a study provides a sufficiently detailed or thick description to permit readers to decide for themselves how well the findings translate to their own particular situation (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, the test of our interpretations will be in the ways that clinicians and stepfamily members themselves find them useful in their work and daily interactions, respectively. While there are many implications for interactants in these present data, we highlight applications in four areas.

As we responded to the call to focus on stepchildren's perspectives on stepfamily communication, our first suggestion is more general in nature, but we do believe it is critically important. We remind adults who are co-parenting children in these stepfamilies, and professionals working with stepfamilies, to listen carefully to the voices of the children in these families to help understand their perspective and help them work through the challenges of their experiences. Ganong and Coleman (2004) suggested that professionals working with stepfamilies help stepfamily members find a workable middle ground and to reframe the ways they think about situations that are bothering the stepfamily members, "helping individuals to redefine a situation or experience in a more positive and manageable way"

(p. 223). In addition, they stressed that stepfamily members may need communication and conflict management training to help them navigate the waters in developing and maintaining relationships in the stepfamily.

However, from the theoretical perspective of relational dialectics, it is important to frame contradictions not as problems in need of resolution but as opportunities or catalysts for change (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). The findings of the present study point to a second suggestion and opportunity for change in how nonresidential parents and their children construct the parent-child relationship. Our participants experienced loss because their point of comparison was the parent they remembered while their family of origin was intact. With this benchmark of what the old or original family was like in mind, communication with the nonresidential parent was found problematic. Stepfamily researchers have suggested that stepfamily members often retain traditional family expectations, scripts, and models, and that such a carry-over effect can function as an obstacle to well-being for stepfamily members (e.g., Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001; Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Stepchildren need encouragement and support to develop new conceptions of parenting liberated from the intact-family model. Professionals working with stepfamilies need to help stepchildren make this transition. As stepchildren receive assistance in reconceptualizing parenting, the children may lessen their experience of divided loyalties, for instance. Such a reconceptualization may create a space for them to reconstruct their experience of parental loss into realization of a new kind of parenting from the nonresidential parent, a kind of parenting less wedded to a model of parenting that is a residual of the intact family of origin.

Our third suggestion is that it is important that professionals working with stepfamilies help co-parents, and especially nonresidential parents, to understand the challenges stepchildren face as they try to maintain a relationship with both of their parents and with two households. The relational dialectics perspective adopted in this study potentially can help professionals and co-parents better understand the contradictions stepchildren experience regarding parenting from nonresidential parents, both wanting and finding parenting difficult. Professionals need to help nonresidential parents to enact the parenting role as effectively as possible, recognizing potential ambivalence that stepchildren may have over visiting and accepting parenting from their nonresidential parent while, at the same time, wanting a relationship and parenting from him or her. Professionals need to work with nonresidential parents and their fellow co-parents on issues concerning the quality of contact children have with their nonresidential parent, as well as the timing of contacts. This may involve reviewing and perhaps altering visitation agreements, for example, and better preparing stepchildren for visits with their nonresidential parent.

It is clear that any prescription in which the stepchild is simply encouraged to talk more openly with the nonresidential parent about his or her feelings may be problematic. Although our participants longed for open communication with the nonresidential parent, they experienced substantial ambivalence grounded in either anticipated hurt feelings for that parent or concern about creating negative feelings between co-parents. Stepchildren may benefit from reframing work by professionals and by parent alike designed to underscore that the child need not bear the burden of responsibility for the emotional lives of adult co-parents.

Finally, it is important that professionals working with stepfamilies, whether via the courts or in a counseling capacity, help stepchildren and nonresidential parents develop family structures, along with models of interaction and parenting that reflect the nature and status of their relationship in the stepfamily years. The results of our study suggest that stepchildren, and by implication the co-parents and stepparents with whom they are interdependent, face complex dialectical challenges that are evident even in stepfamilies that have moved beyond early formative years.

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