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Stepchildren's Perceptions of the Contradictions in Communication with Stepparents

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Abstract

This interpretive study, framed in relational dialectics theory, sought to identify stepchildren's perceptions of the contradictions that animate communication with the stepparent in their household of primary residence. In-depth interviews were conducted, producing 802 pages of double-spaced interview transcripts, which were analyzed inductively for commonly experienced contradictions of stepchild-stepparent communication. Three underlying contradictions were identified. First, stepchild-stepparent communication was perceived to be characterized by a dialectic of integration, characterized by both closeness and distance. Second, stepchild-stepparent communication was perceived to be characterized by a dialectic of parental status, in which the stepparent was, and was not, granted legitimacy in a parent role. Third, stepchild-stepparent communication was perceived to be animated by a dialectic of expression in which both candor and discretion were featured.

Keywords: relational dialectics, stepfamilies, stepparent-stepchild communication

Although the number of stepfamilies formed legally has recently dropped slightly (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995), its social presence as a family form cannot be missed. In 1996, 17% of minor-aged children were estimated to be living in a stepfamily household (Fields, 2001). An estimated 30% of children in the United States will spend some time residing in a stepfamily household before they become adults (Bumpass et al., 1995). The 1990s witnessed a burgeoning scholarly interest in stepfamily life (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000).

Although stepfamily functioning is complex, the stepchild-stepparent relationship appears to be an especially important subsystem (Bray & Berger, 1993; Coleman et al., 2000; Golish, 2003). However, to date, researchers have emphasized the perspective of the parents in stepfamilies, and scholars have called for concentration on the experiences of children in stepfamilies (Amato, 1994; Dunn & Booth, 1994; Dunn, Davies, O'Connor, & Sturgess, 2001; Gamache, 1997). In their recent article summarizing a decade of stepfamily research, Coleman et al. concluded that scholars have tended to conceptualize stepchildren as passive recipients in their relationship with parents and stepparents, and they argued for the importance of studying the perspective of stepchildren. Further, stepfamily research has tended to emphasize issues of stepfamily formation and early development, to the relative neglect of more established or stabilized stepfamilies (Golish, 2003; Hetherington, 1999). Thus, the current study emphasizes stepchild perceptions of communication in the stepchild-stepparent relationship in more established stepfamilies. Framed in relational dialectics theory, the goal of the study is to identify commonly experienced contradictions that stepchildren perceive to animate their current communication with the stepparent in their primary household of residence.

Relational dialectics (Baxter, 2004; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) is a theory of relationship communication informed by the mid-twentieth century work on dialogism by the Russian language philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1981). A central tenet of the theory is that relating is a dialogic process, that is, a communicative process characterized by the unity of opposed tendencies. Contradiction, a unity of opposites, is thus a central analytic concept in relational dialectics. From a relational dialectics perspective, then, relating can best be understood by identifying the primary contradictions that animate communication between parties. Contradiction should not be mistaken for disagreement in which one party adopts one viewpoint and the second party adopts the opposite view – attitude against attitude. Instead, contradiction refers to the simultaneous opposing demands or ‘pulls’ that constitute their relationship. For example, existing research informed by a dialectical perspective has identified three common contradictions: dialectics of integration-separation, stability-change, and expression-nonexpression (for a review, see Baxter & Braithwaite, in press). Relationships are built as much on the discursive ‘pull’ of separation and autonomy as on the discursive demands of integration or connection; interactional stability and certainty can be heard alongside uncertainty, spontaneity, and change; and candor is as central as discretion to the business of relating.

Although these three contradictions appear to be quite powerful in the interactions of relating partners, it is important to note that they are neither exhaustive nor invariably the same from one relational context to another (Baxter, 2004). From a relational-dialectics perspective, contradictions are always situated phenomena, obligating researchers to study them in the context of the particularities of given relationships or relationship types (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

Analytically, a relational-dialectics approach focuses on the dialogic ‘both-and’ of relating, in contrast to an ‘either-or’ logic. As Holquist (1990) describes it, an ‘either-or’ logic emphasizes differences as mutually exclusive possibilities; if X is present, Y is absent or at least diminished. By contrast, a ‘both-and’ dialogic asks about the simultaneity of both X and Y. Of course, given the competing, oppositional nature of X and Y, their simultaneity

results in a tension-filled indeterminacy of meanings in which neat and tidy outcome choices of *X or Y* are theoretically foreclosed. Individuals caught up in 'both-and' relating are likely to experience substantial ambivalence as they feel simultaneously attracted to, yet repulsed by, the simultaneity of opposing tendencies.

To date, much of the work on stepfamilies in general, and the stepchild-stepparent relationship in particular, can be characterized by a nondialogic, 'either-or' logic. Researchers have generally sought to categorize given stepchild-stepparent relationships into mutually exclusive outcomes – for example, those in which the relationship is more satisfying versus less satisfying, more conflictual versus less conflictual, more close versus less close (whether operationalized at ordinal levels of measurement, or beyond). The research task has been that of identifying which independent variables (e.g., sex of stepparent, strength of the spousal marriage) better predict and explain these outcomes (for an excellent review of existing research, see Coleman et al., 2000). Although this research enterprise has advanced our knowledge of factors that account for different outcomes in the stepchild-stepparent relationship, it has adopted the 'either-or' logic of mutually exclusive possibilities. By contrast, relational dialectics would have us approach the stepchild-stepparent relationship from the alternative, dialogic of 'both-and.' From this dialogic standpoint, the stepparent-stepchild relationship would be viewed as a system of substantial complexity, characterized by both satisfaction and dissatisfaction, both conflict and cooperation, both closeness and distance, and so forth. The dialogic project, then, is that of identifying the salient 'both-and' themes that animate relating.

Of course, the dialogic of 'both-and' does not obligate a theoretical commitment to the absolute equality of opposed tendencies. Bakhtin (1981, p. 272) framed the 'both-and' dynamic as a 'tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies,' 'the centripetal' (forces of greater centrality) and 'the centrifugal' (more marginalized or de-centered forces). At a given moment, one opposed tendency may be more prominent (or centripetal, in Bakhtin's terms), whereas its opposite may be more muted (or centrifugal); at another moment, these saliences may be reversed. Thus, a dialogic view does not commit us to see all stepchild-stepparent relationships as homogeneous in a perfectly balanced state of opposed, yet equal, outcomes. Rather, a dialogic view urges us to appreciate, and listen for, both the more central and the more muted themes as they interpenetrate simultaneously in the relationship. For example, a dialogic approach would invite us to understand how, for example, both distance and closeness are unified in relating between stepchildren and their stepparents.

A dialogic sensibility to the stepchild-stepparent relationship underscores the complexity of communication in this relationship type. Extending our prior example, communication is a complicated discursive dance of both closeness and distance, not simply one or the other.

Although her study was not explicitly dialogic in nature, Golish (2003) reported a striking pattern of 'both-and' themes in her study of established stepfamilies. Stepfamilies characterized as more or less strong reported that they experienced the same challenges, including several that hint at stepchild-stepparent contradictions (e.g., a pull between talking and not talking directly to the stepparent, and ambiguity concerning whether the stepparent had disciplinary authority). However, Golish's study does not clearly focus on the

stepchild perspective given its attempt to focus on the stepfamily as a whole unit. In light of the dialogic hints in her findings, Golish argues that future research on stepfamilies could benefit from explicitly applying dialectical theory.

Some limited stepfamily research has been framed by dialectical theory. Over a decade ago, Cissna, Cox, and Bochner (1990) conducted an interpretive study of the organizing dialectics of stepfamily life, from the perspective of the adult spouses from nine stepfamilies. From the adult perspective, stepfamily life revolved around the dialectical tension between the 'freely chosen marital relationship and the not-so-freely chosen stepparent relationship' (p. 44). The more time and effort invested in securing the solidarity of the marriage, the less available to invest in the stepparent relationship, and vice versa. Thus, from the perspective of the adults, the marriage and the stepparent relationship were oppositional. Couples took actions to privilege the solidarity of their marriage, believing that the stepfamily stood little chance of success if the adult marriage did not last. The adults reported that they then used this relationship security as a platform upon which to support and validate stepparent authority. If the partners built a marriage on trust and cooperation, the 'natural parent' was better positioned to support the spouse in his or her efforts to parent the stepchildren, thereby signaling to the children that the stepparent was being legitimated in the parenting role.

Although stepchildren were not included in the Cissna et al. (1990) study, the findings are nonetheless suggestive of possible contradictions that stepchildren may experience in light of the adult efforts to privilege their marriage. If the Cissna et al. findings are generalizable, stepchildren may perceive the stepparent as a competitor for the attentions of the parent, creating the conditions for emotional ambivalence toward the stepparent – resentment and distance given the stepparent's role as an outside competitor coupled with the motivation for closeness as a way to respect the parent's new marriage and its centrality to the stepfamily household. Further, the Cissna et al. (1990) finding of adult efforts to legitimate the parenting authority of the stepparent may exacerbate the stepchild's dialectically based ambivalence. If the residential parent were perceived as 'siding with' the stepparent in discipline matters, the child's sense that he or she was in a competition for the parent's loyalty could further provoke distance from the stepparent.

Braithwaite, Baxter, and Harper (1998) identified this contradiction for newly developing stepfamilies in their dialectical study of stepfamily ritualizing. A contradiction was experienced between felt closeness with, and loyalty to, the family of origin (the 'old family') combined with growing closeness in the stepfamily (the 'new family'). Unfortunately, their work did not clearly discriminate the perspective of the stepchild from the perspective of adults in the stepfamily; further, their study sheds little insight into more established stepfamily experiences.

The Cissna et al. (1990) findings surrounding the challenges of legitimation of parenting by the stepparent may point to another possible contradiction from the stepchild perspective. The stepchild may experience loyalty conflicts between the stepparent and the non-residential parent, positioning him or her to simultaneously be attracted to, yet repulsed by, even the most supportive of parenting activities by the stepparent. Braithwaite et al. (1998) identified this loyalty conflict as part of their 'old family'–'new family' contradiction among stepfamily members in developing stepfamilies. In addition, some nondialectically

based work is suggestive of a felt loyalty conflict on the part of stepchildren (Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001; Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1987; Pasley, Dollahite, & Ihinger-Tallman, 1993).

To summarize, existing research on the stepchild-stepparent relationship has been dominated by a nondialogic approach, ignoring the possibility of a dialogic 'both-and' complexity. Further, this work has tended to privilege the adult (step)parent perspective, to the relative neglect of the stepchild perspective. Finally, existing work has tended to focus on developing stepfamily dynamics, to the relative neglect of more established stepfamilies. The current study, framed in relational dialectics theory, is interested in the unity of oppositions – the contradictions – that may animate stepchild-stepparent communication in more established stepfamilies. The research question guiding the present study was: What contradictions, if any, are perceived by stepchildren to characterize communication with their stepparents in their primary household of residence?

The current study, like the dialectically based studies of Cissna et al. (1990) and Braithwaite et al. (1998), takes an interpretive approach to the study of contradictions. Although the methodological commitments of relational dialectics are ecumenical (Baxter, 2004), qualitative/interpretive methods are more appropriate when questions of meaning are central to the researcher's task. In focusing on the ways that stepchildren make sense of their current relationship with their stepparent, we are centered in the study of meanings. Our goal is not to enumerate contradictions and locate variables that would enable the prediction and explanation of their presence. Although this could be a viable project for a more quantitatively oriented scholar of post-positivist inclinations, it is a project different from ours. Although the interpretive approach is a broad one with multiple philosophical and methodological orientations encompassed within it (Bochner, 1985), the central focus is to seek intelligibility and understanding by studying the meanings that phenomena or processes hold to the research participants themselves. As (Geertz, 1973, p. 5) has emphasized, social life is a 'web of significance' spun by participants. The goal of the interpretive researcher is to analyze symbolic modes of expression, such as the interview transcripts employed in the current study, for their patterns of meaning, not patterns of co-occurrence between researcher-identified variables. As Bochner (1985) stated, 'By analyzing symbolic actions in terms of their meanings, the investigator hopes to gain access to the informal logic of social life' (p. 44). Framed in relational dialectics, we amend Bochner's statement to assert a purpose of analyzing stepchildren's meanings of stepchild-stepparent communication in order to access the informal dialogics of the relationships included in our sample.

Method

Participants

An availability sample of 50 participants, 33 females and 17 males, volunteered to be interviewed about their respective stepfamilies in exchange for extra credit in undergraduate communication courses at two large Midwestern universities. The mean age of participants was 21.0 years ($SD = 1.7$ years). The sample was 94% Caucasian. In the event that a participant was a member of multiple stepfamily structures, we asked him or her to discuss

the stepfamily with whom he or she spent the majority of time. The mean length of participants' stepfamilies was 11.9 years ($SD = 4.3$ years). Referring to Ganong and Coleman's (1994) description of stepfamily types, 10 of the participants were members of simple stepfamily structures (one of the remarried parents brings children to the stepfamily), with seven stepfathers and three stepmothers. Forty of the participants were members of complex stepfamily structures (both spouses enter the marriage with children from prior relationships). Twenty-four of these complex-structure families had a stepfather and 16 had a stepmother. Forty-nine of the stepfamilies formed post-divorce or separation and one family formed after the death of a parent.

Although we analyzed data from all 50 participants, theoretical saturation was achieved in the first 28 transcripts. That is, after the first 28 transcripts were analyzed, no new themes were identified and subsequent interviews repeated themes already identified.

Data collection procedures

Interviewers and stepchildren participated in semistructured, focused interviews, following an interview guide and, at the same time, allowing interviewers freedom to pursue other topics that arose (see Kvale, 1996; McCracken, 1988). The interviewers targeted the stepchildren's reflections on communication and relationships in the stepfamily. Interviews lasted approximately one hour.

The two senior authors trained the four interviewers (all masters or doctoral students). Interviewers asked and received permission to tape-record the interviews. These tapes were transcribed for the purpose of analysis. Participants were assured of their confidentiality, consistent with institutional policies to protect human subjects.

Participants provided the researchers with demographic information about their stepfamily, including its composition and how and when the family was formed. Interview questions of relevance to this study focused on participants' perceptions of communication in their stepfamily. In particular, participants were asked to tell a story about a typical communication event in their stepfamily and to discuss that narrative with the interviewer. Participants were asked to reflect on the positive and challenging aspects of communication in the stepfamily as a whole, and separately with each member of their stepfamily – the parent, nonresidential parent, stepparent, siblings, stepsiblings, and extended family members. This study focuses on perceptions of the stepchild-stepparent relationship only.

Data analysis

Data for the present study were 802 pages of double-spaced interview transcripts. Analytic coding (Lindlof, 1995) was used to identify perceived contradictions in stepchild-stepparent communication. Analytic coding begins with reading through all of the transcripts several times in order to gain holistic familiarity with the data set as a whole. Analytic coding then involves the derivation of codes and categories to capture major themes of relevance to the study. Analytic coding in this study was organized around Spradley's (1979) Attribution semantic relationship, 'X is an attribute (characteristic) of Y.' We focused on two semantic relationships, the characteristics of positive communication and the characteristics of challenging communication with the stepparent. 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 data cases. Once we had identified themes of positive communication and themes of challenging communication, we turned to the analytic task of finding connections among the coded categories, using the transcript as our unit of analysis. Our analysis was oriented toward answering Spradley's (1979) semantic relationship of Strict Inclusion: 'X is a kind of Y,' where 'contradiction' became the 'Y.' Central to this analytic task was the identification of simultaneous opposites in our participants' talk. For example, during initial analytic coding, one category identified for positive communication with the stepparent was emotional closeness and another category was emotional distance. We noted that a participant's simultaneous closeness with and distance from the stepparent was a contradiction, leading us to posit 'closeness-distance' as a kind of contradiction. The identification of kinds of contradictions was an inductive and iterative process, as was the process of identifying initial themes of positive communication and themes of challenging communication. In identifying contradictions during this second stage of coding, themes from the initial stage of coding that were not dialectical were dropped from further analysis.

Two of the researchers independently conducted analytic coding, comparing their analyses at the conclusion of the process. Differences were minor, largely limited to labeling choices rather than conceptual choices. For example, one researcher employed 'closeness-distance' to describe a contradiction that the other researcher had labeled 'together-separate.' In discussion, it became apparent that the same characteristics had been identified at the conceptual level by both researchers. Finally, the analysis was checked by a third member of the research team to ensure consistency of the categories and to identify any rival explanations of the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This coding process resulted in three underlying contradictions in stepchild-stepparent communication, which we describe later.

Each transcript was coded for the presence/absence {1, 0} of each of the three identified contradictions. Chi-square tests were performed to determine whether the presence of each contradiction varied by stepfamily length (with a median split dividing the sample into less established and more established families), stepfamily type (simple vs. complex), and sex of stepparent (stepmother vs. stepfather). Results indicated no significant differences, which allows us to discuss these contradictions as characteristic of the sample as a whole.

Results

The interpretive analysis resulted in the identification of three underlying contradictions experienced by the stepchildren interviewed in this study: dialectics of emotional distance-closeness, stepparent status, and expression. At least one of these contradictions, and usually multiple contradictions, was identified in 48 of the 50 interviews. Each contradiction is discussed in turn.

The dialectic of emotional distance-closeness

Closeness and distance are opposing concepts, yet our stepchild participants expressed both emotions simultaneously in reflecting on their communication with their stepparent. Many of our participants reported an emotional distancing from their stepparent. A discursive companion to emotional distance, however, was the expression of actual and desired closeness with the stepparent. Sometimes their expressions of closeness appeared in almost the same breath as their expressions of distance. In other instances, the discussion of closeness appeared elsewhere in the interview. The dialectic of distance-closeness surfaced in several ways with several distinct radiants of meaning (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

Emotional distance

Several of our participants reported an awkward emotional distancing from their stepparent. This 19-year-old female participant, in a simple stepmother family of 10 years, reported this distancing to us this way:

Well, I guess it's not like we're real close. Like, I feel I can talk to her like a friend, but it's almost awkward when I am leaving to give her a hug. And I have been around her for years and years, but I don't think I have ever told her that I loved her. It's . . . kind of weird. (#37, ll. 97–100)

This participant felt some closeness with the stepmother – she could talk with her like a friend – yet she felt at the same time emotional distance from her. She felt as if they were not very close, and she could not bring herself to express positive affection to her stepmother.

Sometimes this emotional distance was attributed to the absence of things in common – almost as if the stepparent were a stranger of sorts. A 21-year-old male participant, in a simple stepfather family for 14 years, captures this theme:

We just don't have anything in common. We are just two very different people. And it's hard . . . it's like we have to get along to make everybody happy. . . . It's hard work getting along with him sometimes because we're so different. But with honesty and mutual respect for each other, we get it done. (#40, ll. 65–69)

This participant felt that he had a basically positive relationship with the stepparent – one of honesty and mutual respect – yet he felt as if the two were very different people with little in common.

For other participants, the source of emotional distance was the 'outsider' status of the stepparent. Although our participants were in established stepfamilies, several of them still retained a boundary around their family-of-origin in which the stepparent was positioned as a distant outsider. For these participants, the stepparent was simply 'there,' living in the house but residing outside of the boundary of what was legitimated as the actual 'family.' One 22-year-old female participant, from a complex stepfather family structure of 13 years' duration, metaphorically described this insider-outsider boundary as follows:

'It's kind of like there are always like walls up all around' (#21, ll. 72–73). The wall, to this participant, located the residential mother, her biological siblings, and herself on one side, and the stepfather and her stepsiblings on the other side. This wall phenomenon characterized everyday communication in the family, but it was particularly salient when the mother and her children would have 'special time together – we'd go shopping or go to the movies' (ll. 130–131). The stepfather was excluded from these special times, and he did not attempt to seek inclusion: 'He'd kind of wonder what we were doing but he just kind of let us do our own thing' (ll. 140–141). Of course, such occasions of exclusion perpetuated the 'wall' she felt between herself and her stepfather.

Participants who still had a positive relationship with their nonresidential parent sustained emotional distance from their stepparent because of loyalty they felt toward their nonresidential parent. They felt that too much closeness with the stepparent would somehow be disloyal to their other parent. This sentiment was echoed by a 21-year-old female participant, who responded this way to the interviewer's final question, 'Is there anything else you would like to add to help me understand communication in your stepfamily?':

A lot of people, like when they are in stepfamilies and stuff they will call their stepdad 'dad.' I don't; I still call him Jim. I think a lot of that has to do with the fact that I still talk to my dad all the time and am still really close with my dad. I wouldn't want to feel like I was trying to replace him or something. (#39, ll. 155–158)

In her simple stepfather structure for 11 years, this participant felt that calling her stepfather 'dad' would have signaled excessive closeness, and a betrayal of her closeness with her real dad. She elected to use what she regarded as a more distancing label – her stepfather's first name.

For other participants, the emotional distance felt toward the stepparent was linked with his or her perceived interference with the bond between the residential parent–child relationship. For many of the stepchildren, the stepparent was perceived as a wedge who came between the participant and his or her residential parent.

The stepparent-as-wedge functioned in two ways for our participants. First, several participants reported to us that their stepparent often 'butted in' on matters thought appropriate only for the child and his/her parent. Such interference often resulted in the parent changing his or her mind, siding with the stepparent against the child. The following account, provided by a 20-year-old female from a complex stepfamily structure with a stepfather of 6 years, illustrates this theme. In response to a question in which the participant was asked to tell a story about a typical communication event in her stepfamily, the participant shared this story:

Well actually something happened recently which is kind of strange because it was right after I signed up for this [interview] and my sister called me one morning. When I left for college she moved to Oregon and we're 14 months apart so we're pretty close and we were raised like twins almost by our mom. . . . All of a

sudden, she calls me and she's moving back [home], and I guess there's a problem. . . . He [stepfather] basically told my sister she wasn't welcome in the house because she's moving back . . . and her boyfriend's coming with her. . . . My mom is constantly being overruled by [my stepfather] because he always persuades her to take the negative view about it and if she says 'yes' . . . he'll snap right in there and she'll say 'no' after that, so he kind of dominates her decisions. (#8, ll. 74–93)

To this participant, the stepfather intervened and persuaded the residential parent to make a decision she otherwise would not have made. In the absence of the stepfather's intervention, this participant felt that the mother would have made a different decision, one more supportive of her sister. In this instance, the stepfather thus functioned as a wedge between mother and daughter. In fact, this participant described her stepfather as 'an outsider coming in' (#8, l. 202). Such unwelcome interference was a source of emotional distance from her stepfather.

To several stepchildren, the residential parent–stepparent bond was impenetrable and they perceived that this bond usually worked against the child. One 21-year-old female participant explained the following to us about her stepfather of 6 years in a complex step-family structure:

Like with disagreements and stuff, they both kind of, sort of stick together. They don't you know like [my stepfather] wouldn't side with me or he wouldn't side with one of us; he'd definitely side with my mom. Like he'd totally agree with my mom, so that's kind of difficult in the family. Like, and especially sometimes when [my stepfather] gets in arguments with like one of us, um, again like my mom is always on his side so that's kind of difficult, you know. . . . They both like, [kind] of like stick together. (#9, ll. 319–327)

As was common with many of our participants, this young woman perceived that the mother-child bond had been superseded by the parent-stepparent bond, privileging the marital relationship over the relationship she had with her parent.

A second way the stepchild experienced the stepparent as a wedge was in the competition for attention and affection from the residential parent. This perceived competition appeared especially salient with stepmothers, at least in this particular group of stepfamilies represented in these data. This perception of competition heightened when the father remarried a younger woman who was close in age to the daughter. In this example, a 20-year-old female reflected on how her stepfamily was formed and then expressed the following to the interviewer:

When I'm with my dad we're awesome together and then when she's along it's just like, it's almost like she's another child, like we are both a lot alike, like we both get our way all of the time and since I am the only child I'm so used to having all of my dad's attention all of the time. So when she came, or when I had to deal with the fact that she was always there, it just took away from what I

wanted and I've always just felt like I was his first priority, but she, she's really like, we're both the same way. It's not that I'm saying that she's a bad person. It's just that I think that I'm needy and she's needy and we both just pull at each other really hard, because we both want our way, especially with my dad. (#10, ll. 106–115)

This participant, from a simple stepfamily structure of 7 years' duration, felt that she was in competition with her stepmother for her father's attention. From her perspective, the father faced needs and demands from two 'children,' herself and the stepmother who was almost like 'another child.'

Emotional closeness

At the same time that participants reported to us their emotional distance from the stepparent, they also spoke to us about their desired, or actual, closeness with the stepparent. Several participants revealed to us that they did not currently experience closeness with the stepparent, but they desired closeness with them. These participants wanted their actual experiences in their stepfamily to match their idealizations of what family life should be. Caught in the disjuncture of the real with the ideal, these participants longed for closeness and intimacy with the stepparent, because this matched their conception of what happened in a 'real family.' As one 22-year-old female participant, from a complex stepfamily structure of 19 years' duration, expressed to us:

I don't really think it should be a 'step family.' You shouldn't concentrate on being a 'step family' if you are there married and sharing this bond it should be just a family. . . . I always wanted like a family . . . [where] you can really sit down and talk as a family, and . . . the child will listen and respect what their mother and father have to say, but with me it's like I always had an outsider [stepfather]. . . . I mean, I had a really bad attitude. (#13, ll. 92–129)

Although this person positioned her stepparent as an outsider, she longed for a different family experience, one that matched her idealization of everyone gathered together in close and mutually respectful interactions.

Many participants embraced the stepparent, because they believed that the remarriage brought happiness to their residential parent. As one 21-year-old female participant, from a complex stepfamily structure of 6 years' duration, told us:

I'm just thankful that my mom does have [my stepdad] around, you know, because then my mom doesn't have to handle it all on her own. So . . . I just think it [stepfamily life] takes some work, but I don't know, it works out for the most part. (#9, 697–699)

Although it was effortful, this participant built a successful relationship with her stepfather because he provided support and happiness to her mother.

Other participants embraced the stepparent because they were happier in the stepfamily than they were before the new family formed. When asked about what was positive in communicating with her stepfather, this 19-year-old female told us:

We have fun. There were times we would hang out and play games and whatever. He was willing to help me out which I think was great. Actually, I remember a really good time. Just earlier this year, he tried to teach me how to drive a stick [shift]. He tried to teach me how to drive his truck. I was really surprised that he was so patient with me and everything. . . . I was surprised that he would want to do that. He totally took me under his wing and tried to teach me. . . . Little things like that; it wasn't really anything he said but it was the action that he did. (#42, ll. 88–93)

This participant, in her complex stepfamily structure for 8 years, told us that she was surprised to find that her stepparent was a positive, supportive presence in her life. Her experience with her stepfather was positive overall and a source of closeness that she desired. However, the closeness that participants felt toward their stepparent was often highly ambivalent and integrally related to the second contradiction of parental status that we discuss next.

The dialectic of stepparent status: One parent or two parents in the stepfamily

Many of the stepchildren in this study experienced a dialectical tension between a desire for family authority to reside in one parent (their residential parent) and a desire for both the residential parent and the stepparent to share parenting authority. Although related to issues of closeness and distance, at stake in this second dialectic is whether or not the stepchildren will grant parental authority to the stepparent, and our participants expressed much ambivalence concerning this issue.

Some participants felt that it was important to stepfamily closeness to get beyond distinctions between 'real' and 'step' parents. One 21-year-old male participant, from a complex stepfamily structure of 5 years' duration, expressed this theme in the following way:

In a stepfamily, they usually just go to the parent and I like go to my dad, I wouldn't go to my stepmom. . . . But once you get pretty well-knit, you go to either one; it doesn't matter pretty much. . . . I honestly don't see any difference [between a stepfamily and a family of origin with two parents]. (#4, ll. 197–206)

This participant, like several others, felt that legitimating the stepparent as a parent was important in forming close stepfamilies.

Many of our participants embraced the presence and support afforded by the parenting actions of the stepparent, and even bonded emotionally with the stepparent because of that support, as we noted earlier for the dialectic of integration. However, at the same time, they refused to accept the stepparent's role as an authority figure. Stepchildren often appreciated closeness with the stepparent but felt ambivalent about the relationship at the

same time. One 21-year-old male participant, from a simple stepfather family structure of 16 years' duration, expressed his feelings this way to the interviewer:

R: Can you describe the most positive aspects of communication with your stepfather in the stepfamily?

E: I would say the fact that he had a respect for me as a son, not just a stepson. He respected me, um, as far as realizing what was important to me. I think part of that came because he was in the house and he did know, from the time I started sports when I was probably five or six, he realized how important [sports] were to me. . . . But at the same time, anytime I felt like he was taking too active of a role. . . . It was almost like I put a limit on what I wanted to hear from him. 'Okay, you told me this, that's enough. I am not going to listen anymore.' So, I think, that varies a lot from a real family, where, you know, you listen to your dad because that's your dad. (#45, ll. 95–125)

Many of our participants expressed resistance to the stepparent's authority because this person was not a 'real' mother or 'real' father. Yet, they were torn by this view, because they appreciated and wanted many of the parenting behaviors that stepparents might enact.

Other participants thought it was naïve to expect stepparent involvement in their lives without granting legitimate authority to the stepparent – involvement was intimately intertwined with issues of authority. This point is nicely captured in this excerpt from an interview with a 19-year-old female participant from a complex stepfamily structure of 9 years' duration:

I think that if [my stepmother] would have just said 'You kids need to do this' or 'You kids need to come home at a decent time' or 'We all need to sit down and discuss this curfew thing,' I think that if she would have said that to us, we would have had more respect for her in the long run. We would have respected her for coming to us. At the same time we would have been mad because we didn't want to come home early. . . . [Stepparents] need to be involved in [a] child's life. They need to act as if it is their own child but yet give them the space that they need, also. It is a touchy situation but I think that it is possible to work out. (#36, ll. 60–83)

To this participant, a stepparent needed to display involvement in a stepchild's life, and she thought that parental authority was important in accomplishing such involvement. However, this participant's comments also point clearly to the ambivalence of her view of shared parenting and stepparent involvement. In sum, our participants expressed a dialectical tension on the issue of parental authority. On the one hand, they wanted the stepparent to have full parental rights as an authority figure. On the other hand, they resisted such legitimization.

The dialectic of expression: Openness versus closedness

The third contradiction we identified in the interview data was that of expressive openness-closedness. The stepchildren expressed a desire for open communication with the stepparent. Yet, at the same time, they also resisted such openness and favored instead communication that lacked candor.

The dialectic of expression with the stepparent was framed within a broader set of beliefs about the communicative requirements of all stepfamilies. Many participants reflected that they felt that communication in stepfamilies was different from communication in families of origin because stepfamily members are virtual strangers to one another. Such lack of familiarity requires stepfamily members to expend more effort in communicating carefully with one another. Careful communication meant the need for greater directness and openness, which was in contrast to families of origin in which family members could take much for granted. Conversely, openness with relative strangers ran the risk of embarrassment, hurt, or anger because of uncertainty about what should and could be said. Thus, our participants perceived that stepfamilies faced a greater challenge in successfully managing openness and closedness compared to families of origin in which the members had a lifetime to come to know one another. One 19-year-old female participant, from a complex stepmother family structure of 6 years' duration, cogently expressed this view:

I think that in stepfamilies there needs to be a lot more patience than, not to say in a normal family you don't need patience, but there is, like, I know when I talk to my stepfamily I'm always conscious of what I'm saying to them because I don't want to be rude. So, I think, just, just attentiveness to what their separate family needs – like how they functioned before they came [to the stepfamily] and we functioned before we came into a big family. So like, just understanding what they were brought up on, like their values, and . . . be more understanding to that. So I would say that would be different from just like a regular family because you know what happened in their past and when you're just thrown together you don't know. (#15, ll. 165–175)

To this participant, stepfamily members should become familiar with one another's prior family experience, presumably through communication. Yet, such communication carries with it the risk of rudeness because stepfamily members, unlike 'regular' or 'normal' family members, do not know one another.

Participants were fully aware of the tension between openness and closedness with their stepparent. Repeatedly, they shared stories with us about wanting openness, but finding themselves or others hurt by such candor. One 21-year-old female participant, from a complex stepfather family structure of 12 years' duration, shared this story with us:

R: What are the most positive aspects of communication with your stepdad?

E: I suppose that we just said what was on our minds (laughs).

R: How about the most challenging or difficult aspects of communication with him?

E: Um, if you said something that he didn't agree with, he'd just start yelling. . . . Most of our conversations ended up as arguments. . . . I had to tiptoe around him . . .

R: Do you think the communication needs of stepfamilies are different from the needs of families that aren't blended?

E: I guess it's probably harder for stepfamilies because you don't know each other as well. (#30, ll. 37–68)

Although this participant, like many of our interviewees, embraced communicative openness with the stepparent, she found it a risky practice because she did not know her stepfather well enough to predict what would spark an argument and what would not. She felt she had to 'tiptoe around him,' a common theme among our participants.

Another commonly expressed theme among our participants was the perception that ideal stepfamily communication would be characterized by total openness and candor in which family members would respond in nonjudgmental ways. As one 21-year-old female participant, from a simple stepfather family structure of 13 years' duration, said to us:

R: What kind of communication would happen around the dinner table if your stepfamily had what you would regard as ideal communication?

E: I guess we would all ask how we're all doing. If things are going on in our lives since especially I am away at school. . . . Being able to be open with one another, make eye contact, know that you'll be understood, and that what you'll say won't be judged. Just that everyone takes it in and processes it whether they agree or disagree it doesn't matter just as long as they accept what you're saying. (#1, ll. 127–137)

The idealization of openness and acceptance was often used as a benchmark to evaluate the stepparent, and our participants often perceived that their stepparent fell short of realizing this idealization. Stepchildren frequently voiced criticism that the stepparent was not direct and open with them, instead the stepparent expresses opinions about the stepchildren to the residential parent. Stepchildren were frustrated by this lack of openness and directness. In response to the interviewer query about challenging aspects of communication with her stepfather, one 22-year-old female expressed her frustration with her stepfather's lack of open and direct communication with her and her siblings:

If there's a problem, . . . he just tells my mom instead of coming to us and then she comes to us so it's like we got this chain where we can't just directly communicate. . . . It upsets me at times that if my stepfather had something he wanted to say he had to go to my mom and then my mom had to come to me, and I think that put a strain on my relationship with my stepfather, because I was always like 'why can't he just tell me this,' 'why can't he come to me.' And I think my mom was put in the middle a lot of times. (#14, ll. 159–179)

In this example, lack of candor by the stepfather resulted in a strained relationship between them. The stepdaughter, from a complex stepfamily structure of 13 years' duration, preferred that he come to her directly and perceived that it was unfair to her mother who often got caught in the middle.

Our participants clearly valued openness and were critical of the stepparent who was perceived to lack candor. However, at the same time they simultaneously expressed to us the closedness that they enacted in interactions with the stepparent.

Participants expressed caution in communicating with the stepparent because they feared that this information would not be held in confidence. Stepchildren perceived that the marital bond was so strong between the parent and the stepparent that each would inform the other about what the stepchild said. A 21-year-old male participant expressed this concern with respect to confidentiality problems with his stepmother:

E: My stepmom, I think of her almost like an older girl almost, just like some friend. She is a really good friend and also she has been really nice. . . . I got really lucky [in my stepmom] . . .

R: What about challenges in communicating with your stepmom?

E: Anything I tell her goes straight to my dad. Oh yeah. When you think I always thought of her as like the unbiased mediator I thought it was confidential but then I started getting my dad coming back to me on certain things I wouldn't tell him, that did not go over well.

R: So the challenge is . . .

E: Not confidential. (#4, ll. 222–256)

This participant, from a complex stepfamily structure of 5 years' duration, valued talking with his stepmother, even though he knew that she would reveal confidential information to his father.

Sometimes, discomfort with openness rested in an underlying dislike for the stepparent. A 25-year-old male participant informed us that:

I never really enjoyed her company. . . . None of us really liked her. But we all liked [her kids]. So we [he, his siblings, and his stepsiblings] hit it off plus we were pretty much the same age which helped. . . . She was like somewhat mentally ill. . . . [I] could talk [to her] about . . . football. (#23, ll. 152–247)

After 13 years in his complex stepfamily structure, this participant found that he talked with his stepmother only in a very circumscribed way – on the single topic of football.

Other participants expressed a fondness for the stepparent but still felt the need to limit their communication. One 20-year-old female participant from a complex stepfamily of 10 years' duration, explained:

Like I have told my mom the guy I want to find, I want him to be just like [my stepdad]. But you know, I never speak with him [stepdad] about anything and

that disturbs my mom. . . . So, like, whenever she's not around and I need something, or like whenever I call home, I am like 'Is mom there?' I just feel more comfortable talking to [my mom]. (#41, ll. 239–286)

Occasionally, participants reported that they felt close to their stepparent and reported being open with him or her about most topics, with one major exception – the nonresidential parent. One 22-year-old female participant, from a complex stepfamily of 19 years, shared with us her discomfort in referring to her biological father in the presence of her stepfather:

I don't like to bring up my father with him around. I feel bad. You know when I say 'my father' because I kind of always consider [my stepfather] as my dad. He's been there most of my life and raised me and when I say 'my father' I don't really want to say it since to me it's not true. (#32, ll. 100–102)

This participant refrained from talking about her biological father in the presence of her stepfather because she felt that she was betraying the fathering that the stepfather had provided her for most of her childhood.

To summarize, participants expressed to us a deep and abiding dialectical tension between openness and closedness with the stepparent. Although they wanted total openness and criticized the stepparent when he or she was not open, they themselves engaged in communicative behaviors that often lacked openness. This disjuncture between their idealization of communication and their own communicative realities was a source of discomfort, frustration, and disappointment.

Discussion

Through the results of this study, we highlight the challenges and complexities of communication with stepparents from the perspective of children from stepfamilies. Further, we focused on stepchild-stepparent communication in established stepfamilies, to complement existing research in which newly formed stepfamilies are emphasized. In the present study, we employed a dialectical analysis and identified three underlying contradictions experienced by these stepchildren as they communicate with the stepparent: dialectics of integration, stepparent status, and expression, each with multiple radiants of meaning.

The first contradiction, involving stepchildren's simultaneous expression of both closeness and distance, was clear in our participants' discourse about communication with the stepparent. Our participants experienced an awkward ambivalence in expressing to us that they were close yet distant at the same time from their stepparent. Feelings of distance from the stepparent were attributed to lack of commonalities, the outsider status of the stepparent with respect to the residential parent and siblings, felt loyalty to the nonresidential parent, perceived stepparent interference in the parent-child relationship, and perceived competition for the attention and affection of the residential parent. The desire for closeness with the stepparent was animated by an idealization of what stepfamily life should be like. Participants who experienced some degree of closeness with the stepparent

attributed their feelings to the happiness the stepparent had brought to the residential parent, or positive and supportive interactions with the stepparent.

The emergence of this contradiction is consistent with the implications of the Cissna et al. (1990) study with adults in stepfamilies. For some of our participants, distance and closeness were organized around competition for parental attention coupled with a desire to embrace the parent's remarriage. Further, the perception by some of our participants that the parent-stepparent bond interfered with the parent-child bond is consistent with the implications of the Cissna et al. study. But our findings move beyond the contradictions hinted at by Cissna and his colleagues. Some of our participants felt as if the stepparent was a distant outsider from the 'family' boundary established with the residential parent and biological siblings. This boundary was identified by Braithwaite et al. (1998) in developing stepfamilies, and our findings suggest that, at least for some participants, this insider-outsider boundary persists in established stepfamilies. For some of our participants, the distance-closeness dialectic was animated by a loyalty conflict between the non-residential parent and the stepparent. This has been identified by others as well (e.g., Golish, 2003; Pasley et al., 1993).

Canong, Coleman, Fine, and Martin (1999) stressed that it is important for both stepparents and stepchildren to put forth efforts toward affinity seeking and maintenance, both at the beginning of stepfamily life and especially over time as the family develops. Although our findings support the wisdom of this suggestion, they also complicate the suggestion by underscoring the dialectically driven ambivalence that stepchildren feel toward the stepparent. Stepchildren want closeness, and they do not.

The second contradiction we identified was stepchildrens' ambivalence surrounding the legitimation of parental authority to the stepparent. To some of our participants, legitimating the stepparent as a parent was critical for stepfamily closeness. Many of our participants reported a positive response when they were given parent-like attention, affection, support, and guidance from the stepparent, yet they resisted granting the stepparent authority over them because the stepparent was not the 'real' parent. Some participants recognized that the positive aspects of parenting went hand in hand with issues of control and authority. As Minuchin (1974) noted in describing the dialectical nature of all parent-child relationships, 'Parents cannot protect and guide without at the same time controlling and restricting. Children cannot grow and become individuated without rejecting and attacking. The process of socialization is inherently conflictual' (p. 58). On the face of it, the dialectical ambivalence concerning stepparent authority appears contrary to existing research, which reports that stepchildren prefer a stepparent to be a friend who supports but does not control (e.g., Bray & Harvey, 1995; Henry, 1994; Schwebel, Fine, & Renner, 1991). However, other work by Hetherington and colleagues (for a review, see Hetherington, Henderson, & Reiss, 1999) suggests that such a preference may be developmental. That is, children may initially resent a stepparent with parental authority, but, in long-term stepfamilies, such parental authority is important to healthy relationships. Our findings are more consistent with the work of Hetherington et al.; many of our stepchildren wanted, or accepted, stepparent authority yet at the same time resisted it.

The dialectic of stepparent authority complicates the finding of Cissna et al. (1990) in which the adults formed a bond of marital solidarity as a way of providing legitimacy for

stepparent authority. For many of our participants, such parent-stepparent solidarity created emotional distance from the stepparent, thereby complicating the positive relationship with the stepparent.

Third, many of our stepchildren faced challenges managing a contradiction of expressive openness and closedness. Much like the issues surrounding closeness, stepchildren wanted idealized mutual openness with the stepparent, yet they also resisted such openness. Even though our stepchildren were from established stepfamilies, a perception that the stepparent was a relative 'stranger' persisted. Discretion was perceived as necessary because they could not predict the stepparent's reaction, even after many years of residence with that person. Some stepchildren resisted openness because they believed that the stepparent would privilege the marital bond and would reveal information told to them in confidence by the child. Other stepchildren felt discomfort in discussing the non-residential parent with the stepparent.

Some stepfamily research has found that communicative avoidance is associated with lower levels of stepfamily satisfaction (e.g., Golish, 2000; Vuchinich, Hetherington, Vuchinich, & Clingempeel, 1991). However, our findings are more consistent with those of Golish (2003; Golish & Caughlin, 2002), in arguing for a more complex dialectical view. Although openness matches our cultural ideal of effective communication (Katriel & Philipsen, 1981), it is not necessarily an elixir. Discretion has its merits; our sample of stepchildren emphasized that avoidance was a way to ensure privacy and avoid hurt. Thus, any prescriptive efforts to encourage greater openness between stepchildren and stepparents should be tempered by the dialectical value of closedness, or discretion, at the same time.

Rather than view these three dialectical tensions of integration, stepparental status, and expression as separate, it is important to recognize that these contradictions function interdependently as well. While we have presented these contradictions somewhat separately for the purposes of our analysis, scholars have stressed that the different contradictions are woven together in the complexities of family life, an interdependence labeled totality (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). For example, in our study, the way stepchildren negotiate openness-closedness was integral to their management of closeness-distance issues. However, the nature of the relationship was far from straightforward. Openness could promote closeness, or distance; closedness could sustain distance or create it. Similarly, the dialectic of closeness and distance was bound up with the dialectic of parental authority. Many of our stepchildren experienced closeness in the parenting support and nurturance provided by the stepparent, yet such parenting inevitably implicated issues of control and authority, which could produce emotional distance from the stepparent. The dialectic of openness-closedness is also interdependent with the dialectic of stepparent status. While stepchild openness with the stepparent about the details of their lives is requisite for the stepparent to provide support and assistance, such openness can open the door for stepparent control. However, closedness with the stepparent precludes formation of a bond of support and nurturance. Future research needs to probe in greater detail the dynamics of totality in stepchild-stepparent communication.

Of course, there are limitations to this study as well. First, all of the participants came from different families and there is need for research that solicits both adult and stepchild

perceptions from the same stepfamilies. For example, do parents, stepparents, and stepchildren agree on the dialectical tensions that organize their family experience? Second, because the parent-stepparent relationships/marriages were intact, we wonder if we might have ended up with a self-selected sample of more success cases than actually exist, which may have influenced these data. Stepchild ambivalence may be an index of stepfamily health, whereas distressed stepfamilies might display more either-or reactions by stepchildren, with pervasive themes of distance, nonlegitimation of stepparent authority, and closedness. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) have argued that contradictions are an index of relational vitality, not distress. Third, we interviewed young adult stepchildren, most of whom are now more independent from the stepfamily situation. It would be useful to obtain data from younger children who are likely most affected by the stepfamily during their formative years.

Future research could usefully pursue correlates of the contradictions identified in this study. For our sample of established stepfamilies, relative stepfamily length, stepfamily form, and sex of stepparent were not related to the presence of any of the three identified contradictions. However, our sample size did not permit us to tease out systematic differences in the various radiants of meaning that constituted these contradictions. Researchers also could usefully consider other factors, such as the length of time children lived in single-parent homes and the nature of the relationship with the nonresidential parent, as they relate to these dialectical radiants of meaning. We do recognize, however, that these kinds of questions will be better answered by larger sample quantitative studies than with the interpretive methods we employed in this study. Our interpretive goal was to identify commonly experienced dialectics of communication in the stepchild-stepparent relationship, not locate correlations between them and various exogenous variables. We join other scholars in recommending longitudinal studies of stepfamily life, especially studies that look at how dialectical tensions develop and change over time.

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