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# “Feeling Warmth and Close to Her”: Communication and Resilience Reflected in Turning Points in Positive Adult Stepchild–Stepparent Relationships

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## **“Feeling Warmth and Close to Her”: Communication and Resilience Reflected in Turning Points in Positive Adult Stepchild–Stepparent Relationships**

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**Abstract**

With the goal of understanding the development of positive stepchild–stepparent relationships, the researchers focused on turning points characterizing the interaction of adult stepchildren who have a positive bond with a stepparent. Engaging a relational turning points perspective, 38 stepchildren (males and females, ages 25 to 52 years old) who reported a positive stepparent relationship were interviewed, generating 269 turning points which were categorized into 15 turning point types and coded by valence. Turning points occurring most frequently were: prosocial actions, quality time, conflict/ disagreement, changes in household/family composition, and rituals. Findings are discussed, including implications for developing and enacting resilient and positive stepchild–stepparent relationships and future directions for researchers wanting to focus on positive family interaction.

Stepfamilies are a postmodern family form especially reliant on communication, rather than biological ties or cultural models, to co-construct and enact their relationship (Baxter, 2014; Galvin, 2006). These families are characterized by complex social relations and the stepchild–stepparent relationship often presents significant challenges (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). In the current study, we contribute in three ways to the literature on the development of stepchild–stepparent relationships. First, we respond to calls for improved understanding of family resilience (Afifi, 2008; Beck & Socha, 2015; Buzzanell, 2010, 2018; Zautra, 2009), by exploring the relational histories of those who have overcome the well-documented adversity of stepchild–stepparent relations and evolved positive bonds in adulthood. Second, we compare the relational turning points of these positive relationships to those reported in a pivotal study of the first four years of stepfamily life conducted by Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999). However, in contrast to the work of those scholars, we tracked these relationships well into adulthood, finding that relationships can become more positive with the passing of time, maturation of the parties, and the occurrence of later life-course events such as marriage of the stepchild or the birth of grandchildren. Third, we build on a substantial line of research documenting perceptions of the factors, such as affinity-seeking behaviors, which change or reinforce a stepchild’s judgment about the desirability of the stepparent relationship (e.g., Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999; Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011). Having documented challenges in identifying what precipitated the change in stepchildren’s motivation, Ganong and colleagues (2011)

called for research on change processes. One contribution of the present study is its use of turning points methodology to explore these changes in considerable depth.

### ***Challenges for stepchildren and stepparents***

Scholars focus most often on the challenges unique to stepfamilies, especially within the stepchild–stepparent dyad (e.g., Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004; Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998; Schrodtt, 2006b). This approach has been fruitful, as stepfamilies do confront numerous trials. First, remarried couples, particularly stepparents, face difficult choices regarding role expectations. Stepchildren often reject stepparent discipline, especially early on (Ganong et al., 2011), desiring simultaneous integration (parenting) and distance (nonparenting) from stepparents (Baxter et al., 2004). To best navigate these early challenges, researchers have found that stepparents practice positive regard and openness with stepchildren (Schrodtt, 2006b), and appear to use affinity-seeking behaviors and enact the role of friend more than that of parent (Ganong et al., 1999).

Second, stepfamilies must negotiate the transition from the family of origin to the newly formed stepfamily. For some, this requires managing multiple stepfamilies over time. In their study of turning points in the process of coming to “feel like a family,” as reported by different stepfamily members, Baxter and colleagues (1999) found that one-third of all turning points involved changes in household/family composition (e.g., cohabitation; children moving in and out), stepfamily relocation, and/or changes involving adults across households. Change was also reflected in turning points involving family crisis or navigating family rituals. These challenges may increase emotional and communicative ambivalence of both stepchildren and stepparents.

Third, stepfamilies often experience conflict navigating internal and external boundaries (Baxter et al., 1999; Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001) and triangulating stepfamily relationships where stepchildren may feel caught between divorced parents and stepparents (e.g., Afifi & Schrodtt, 2003; Braithwaite, Toller, Daas,

Durham, & Jones, 2008). The stepchild–stepparent dyad is particularly vulnerable to conflict given its involuntary nature and unclear expectations. Stepchildren often experience loyalty conflicts as they fear, sometimes rightly, that a positive relationship with a stepparent

threatens the nonresidential parent relationship (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). In turn, stepchildren may avoid openness to prevent conflict with a stepparent or nonresidential parent (Afifi, 2003; Baxter et al., 2004).

Although scholars convincingly document the adversity of early stepfamily life, they tend to pay little attention to stepfamily relationships across the life course. They leave us wondering if and how these adversities and ambivalences are worked out as time passes, the parties mature and grow, and life events intervene. Another limitation is the assumption that relational challenges and practices are similar across stepfamilies, yet researchers reveal that some develop strong and positive bonds and others persist in conflictual negative patterns (Ganong et al., 2011). Given the desirability and positive social effects of supportive family relationships, in the present study, we sought to learn more about the developmental trajectories of resilient stepfamilies.

### **Positive stepchild–stepparent relationships**

In recent years, family scholars have called for more research on social aspects of resilience, the processes by which some individuals and relationships bounce back and even thrive after the experience of adversity (Afifi, 2008; Beck & Socha, 2015; Buzzanell, 2018; Kent, Davis, & Reich, 2013). As Zautra (2009) noted, resilience involves not just recovery, but sustaining positive states over long periods of time. Buzzanell (2010) urged researchers to examine how normality is literally talked into being, through the use of such language devices as stories and metaphors (e.g., “bend, but don’t break”). This line of thinking led us to seek studies that focus on behavioral practices that help stepparents foster positive relations with stepchildren, such as expressions of positive regard and openness (Schrodt, 2006b) and affinity-seeking behaviors associated with friendship more than parenting (Ganong et al., 1999). Golish (2003) studied stepfamily coping and resiliency, finding that interaction, openness, clear rules and boundaries, family problem solving, spending time together, and maintaining a positive image of the nonresidential parent contribute to stronger stepfamily relationships. Moreover, Schrodt (2006a) concluded that functional stepfamilies exhibited lower levels of dissension and avoidance and higher levels of involvement, flexibility, and expressiveness.

It appears that the positivity of stepchild–stepparent relationships is central to the satisfaction of the larger stepfamily (Hetherington & Kelley, 2003; Papernow, 2013). For that reason, the stepparenting relationship has received considerable attention. Ganong et al. (1999) examined the strategies used by stepparents to develop affinity with stepchildren. Stepparents who intentionally used affinity-seeking strategies increased perceptions of liking and warmth with their stepchildren. These strategies included creating group activities for the whole family, spending one-on-one time with a stepparent, working alongside a stepparent, and having one-on-one conversations with a stepchild (Ganong et al., 1999). Speer and Trees (2007) found that perceptions of stepparent warmth behaviors were positively associated with stepchildren’s role clarity, which, in turn, was positively associated with connection-seeking behaviors and family satisfaction. Speer and Trees (2007) confirmed Ganong et al.’s (1999) conclusion that stepparents who consistently work to maintain affinity in their relationships with a stepchild receive affinity-seeking behaviors in return.

From these studies, we suggest that the mutual practice of certain communication behaviors should, in part, account for the development of positive stepparenting bonds. However, the investigators rarely acknowledge that, in addition to the communicative efforts of individual stepparents and stepchildren, relationship positivity is shaped by unintentional acts, responses to life events, and the dynamics of the larger family network. Turning points studies, such as those reported by Baxter and colleagues (1999) and the current investigation, are designed to capture this larger array of developmental forces, such as relocation from one’s family home or the loss of family rituals. Another limitation of the literature is its focus on younger stepchildren rather than those who have grown into adulthood, when they presumably are capable of more sophisticated perspective-taking and relational behavior (Papernow, 2013). For example, Speer and Trees (2007) limited their study to adolescent stepchildren, and Ganong et al. (1999) focused on those aged 10 to 19 years. Our intention was to build on these studies with a wider investigation of relational turning points in stepparenting relationships, one that tracked development into adulthood.

## Developmental pathways of positive stepchild–stepparent relationships

Most researchers examine informant reflections on stepfamilies at one point in time via surveys or interviews. Scholars have addressed this limitation by adopting a stage-based view of stepfamily life. For example, Papernow (1993, 2013) developed a seven-stage Stepfamily Cycle model, and recently explored stepfamilies over early, middle, and later stages. However, stage-based models have been convincingly critiqued as insufficient to account for the complexities of relational progression and change (Mongeau & Henningson, 2015). Using qualitative interviews and a grounded theory approach, Ganong et al. (2011) proposed an alternative model, with six possible patterns of step-relationship development (e.g., accepting as a parent, liking from the start, accepting with ambivalence, changing trajectory, rejecting, coexisting). They focus largely on the stepchild's perception of the developing relationship, which is based on such factors as age and the influences of the biological parent. This work is important to the current investigation because it suggests that positive relationships might take multiple forms (e.g., "acceptance," "liking") and develop along multiple pathways (e.g., "changing trajectories"). But the study leaves unanswered questions about how and why these relationships changed over time, leading Ganong and colleagues to question "Why did stepchildren change their attitudes in the *changing trajectory* group?" (p. 211). Still, the participants' developmental perspective was limited by their age, 18–30 years, with a mean of 22.3 years.

Our study builds on the work of Ganong et al. (2011) by using turning points methodology to fully explore how and why these relationships change over a larger period of the life course. We found a partial answer in the 1999 study by Baxter and colleagues, who interviewed a variety of family members (not just stepchildren) about important points of change as they came to "feel like a family" during the first four years. In recruiting families, Baxter and colleagues mixed families that were functioning well with those that were experiencing difficulty. Nonetheless, some of the turning points they identified (see **Table 1** for an adapted version of the expanded list), such as the resumption of family rituals and the management of family crises, may explain why some stepfamily relationships become positive and largely remain so. Other turning points, such as the spending of



**Table 1.** Turning point categories.

Turning point types	Frequency	% of total TPs	% of total TPs reported with positive change	% of total TPs reported with negative change	% of total TPs reported with no change
Prosocial actions	49	18.2	57.1	10.2	32.6
Quality time	45	16.7	68.8	4.4	26.6
Conflict/disagreement	27	10.0	18.5	66.6	14.8
Changes in household/family composition	20	7.4	50	15	35
Rituals	20	7.4	55	15	30
Adult relational change	19	7.0	47.3	15.7	36.8
Family crisis	19	7.0	52.6	10.5	36.8
Positive relational change	18	6.6	83.3	5.5	11.1
Reconciliation/problem solving	12	4.4	83.3	8.3	8.3
Unmet expectations or disappointment	12	4.4	8.3	75	16.6
Relocation or geographic move for household	8	2.9	62.5	12.5	25
Social network related	8	2.9	37.5	50	12.5
Negative relational change	8	2.9	12.5	62.5	25
Life changes for ex-spouse/nonresidential parent	3	1.1	33.3	33.3	33.3
Change in employment for adults	1	0.3	0.0	100	0.0

N = 269

“quality time,” sound similar to the stepparent behaviors described by Ganong and colleagues (1999). However, none of these scholars have examined turning points in stepchild relationships that have evolved well into adulthood and are now considered positive.

### ***Conceptual framework and research question***

To review, our work is grounded in several conceptual commitments. First, we believe relationship progression is best understood by a close examination of those moments of change that participants perceive to be most meaningful. Informed by previous turning points studies, we set out to chronicle turning points over the trajectory of the stepfamily, drawing on the recollections of stepchildren age 25+ who had matured into adulthood. Second, we also grounded this research in evolving understandings of relational resilience (e.g., Fredrickson, 2013; Kent et al., 2013). Communication scholars identify resiliency as a process constituted in interaction (Buzzanell, 2010, 2018) and focus on relational discourses families use to “talk normalcy into being” after periods of adversity (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012). Our research approach allows adult stepchildren to give voice to these discourses.

Third, we agree that resilience is developed over time, as people mature and make sense of the events of their past (Beck & Socha, 2015). For that reason, we examine adults who have come to view their step-relationships as positive, even as we acknowledge the importance of work establishing the turning points during the earliest years of step-family life (Baxter et al., 1999). Given this backdrop, we were guided by this research question: *How do adult stepchildren who have a positive relationship with a stepparent characterize turning points in the development of that relationship?*

## Method

We situated this study in the interpretive paradigm to understand how discourse-dependent families interact and co-construct meaning via a deep reading of relational members' points of view (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Using in-depth interviews, we explored meanings of the lived relational experiences of participants (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Data were drawn from interviews, ranging from 50–90 minutes, with adult stepchildren age 25 years and older whose stepfamilies had formed a minimum of four years earlier. Participants were recruited via announcements on university research websites, via social media, and snowball sampling via networks. For stepfamilies, 48 months has been identified as a “make or break” point in family development (Mills, 1984). Due to our focus on resilient relationships, we wanted participants to have persevered through the tumultuous early years. To increase the clarity of recall, participants were also required to be at least 10 years old when the stepfamily started. The stepparent had to be living and currently married or cohabiting with their biological parent. The stepchild must have considered the relationship to be “overall positive” at the time of the interview.

Thirty-one females (81.6%) and seven males (18.4%), took part, ranging from 25 to 52 years old ( $M = 33.05$ ,  $SD = 7.81$ ). We collected data in the Southwest and Midwest U.S., and the majority of participants identified as Caucasian ( $n = 36$ , 94.7%), with one (2.6%) identifying as African American and one (2.6%) as “Other.” Twenty-seven stepparents described were stepfathers (71.1%) and seven were stepmothers (28.9%), ranging from 41 to 85 years old

( $M = 61.30$ ,  $SD = 9.47$ ). All of the stepparents were of the same ethnicity as their stepchild.

Stepfamily length ranged from four to 38 years ( $M = 18.26$ ,  $SD = 9.60$ ) and 35 (92.1%) participants reported having biological siblings, with three (7.9%) having no siblings. The number of biological (or family of origin) siblings ranged from one to four ( $M = 1.39$ ,  $SD = .79$ ). Thirty-three (86.8%) participants had from one to six stepsiblings ( $M = 1.39$ ,  $SD = .79$ ).

### **Procedures**

Adopting the Retrospective Interview Technique used by previous turning points scholars (e.g., Baxter et al., 1999; Huston, Surra, Fitzgerald, & Cate, 1981), the research team developed and pretested an interview guide to elicit turning points reflecting how positive relationships with stepparents were discursively constructed and enacted from the beginning of the stepfamily to the present. We asked participants to identify the date at which the stepfamily began, rather than identify remarriage as the starting point, since stepfamilies often perceive the start of their family well before remarriage, if marriage occurs at all (Baxter et al., 1999; Ganong & Coleman, 2017).

We asked participants to reflect on both positive and negative turning points, defined as any “significant or pivotal events or experiences at a particular moment or time in your life that were important in bringing your relationship with your stepparent to where it is today.” The interviewer created a visual graph, plotting turning points as the interview unfolded, identifying the date and label for each turning point, and marking a rating of the relationship with their stepparent from 0–100% positive. For each turning point, interviewers probed the context by asking: who was involved, what was and was not discussed, what made them feel more or less positive about their stepparent, and how the situation developed. We ended each interview by asking them to rate the positivity of the relationship today (0%–100%) and to describe how they rate the current state of their relationship.

### **Analysis of data**

Data were 562 single-spaced pages of interview transcripts and 38 turning point graphs. The researchers engaged in five stages to analyze

data and establish validity and reliability of the findings, meeting at each step to discuss and refine the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, we read all transcripts to understand the data set holistically and charted all 269 resulting turning points.

Second, the team coded each turning point, using the Baxter et al. (1999) typology as a starting place. We were mindful of the differences between the studies, as Baxter and colleagues included parents, step-parents, and stepchildren and examined the percentage of “feeling like a family” rather than positivity. We deleted the category “breakup/divorce of the remarriage,” as all stepfamilies in the current study were intact. Four team members, all Ph.D. students, came together with the two senior scholars to train and collectively code four interviews, discussing each coding decision. We agreed to single code turning points as much as possible, focusing on the most salient aspect of each turning point. We also coded each turning point as positive, negative, or neutrally valenced, based on the change in the positivity rating (e.g., a change from 80% to 60% was a negative change). If there was no change in the positivity rating, the turning point was considered neutral. Typically, these events were described as relationally significant but participants believed they had ambiguous, mixed or simply no effects on the positivity dimension. In other cases, the effect was to reinforce an already-positive relationship.

Third, the coders analyzed 10 interviews, working independently and then coming together in pairs to discuss and come to consensus on differences. The research team then met and discussed the efficacy of the typology, making three adjustments from that used by Baxter and colleagues (1999): (a) renamed “holidays and special celebrations” to “rituals” to be consistent with the literature; (b) replaced the categories negative and positive “intrapsychic change” with “positive relational change” and “negative relational change” to better capture co-constructed meanings; and (c) added the category “adult relational change” to account for an alteration in the relationship of adults in the stepfamily or other household(s) that affected the stepchild-step-parent relationship. The final typology of 15 turning point types appears in Table 1.

Fourth, the pairs divided and coded the remaining 24 interviews (204 turning points) and each made independent coding decisions on 12 interviews. Krippendorff’s alpha was .89, with scores of .97 and .77 for the pairs. The first pair coded 132 turning points, so the difference

may reflect a modest practice effect. Any coding discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Agreement on the initial codes was above .80 for nearly all categories, with only the two most infrequent categories exhibiting lower levels of agreement at .77 and .73. Unitizing data was straightforward, as participants self-identified the turning points. Each turning point was coded for its primary meaning, with double codes used in less than 1% of cases, as coders came to consensus on a primary code for the final analysis. Although two of the turning point types occurred infrequently, the researchers chose to keep them in the typology for possible later application in other contexts. Fifth, all members of the research team came together to discuss findings, implications, and to test validity of the results.

## Results

The 15 turning point types are summarized in Table 1. In the following, we discuss the 13 most frequently occurring turning points identified. Turning point types are detailed in order of frequency, starting with the most commonly reported category.

### **1. Prosocial Actions:** *“Four hours before the wedding and I told him that my dad wasn’t coming, and would he walk me down the aisle.”*

Prosocial actions were out-of-the ordinary efforts by a stepparent, such as gift-giving, substantial friendly gestures, or acts of kindness, and represented 18.2% of all turning points ( $n = 49$ ). The turning points were positive in the majority of instances (57.1%), reflected no change in 32.6% of instances, and were negative in five instances. Prosocial Actions ranged from gifts, such as unexpected Valentine’s Day flowers from a stepfather (6:146 = transcript interview/line number) and a stepparent loaning money to buy a car (23:266–272), to acts of kindness, such as helping a stepchild administer a deceased parent’s estate (10:330–355). Some of these actions correspond closely to the affinity seeking actions described by Ganong and colleagues (1999).

Prosocial actions on the part of the stepparent often signaled the existence or commencement of a positive relationship that was not previously recognized or understood. A 27-year-old stepdaughter whose stepfamily started when she was 21 described the significance

of an unexpected gift from her stepmother several months after the stepfamily began:

The following Christmas, her theme ended up being “house” and she got us a box of cleaning supplies, a big huge cardboard box, which sounds weird but we loved it ‘cause we couldn’t afford some of those things. [She] got us bed sheets, bedspreads. And that’s the point where the skepticism started to go away because, “Oh, she’s like a genuinely nice person,” not like some of the other women my dad had been seeing. (15:159–163)

In some instances, a stepparent’s prosocial action(s) provided a welcomed contrast to the actions of their nonresidential parent. A 27-year-old stepdaughter reflected on her stepfather’s actions:

I really wanted to paint my room red when I was like 16. . . . He’s the only parent that’s ever been like, “I just want to make you happy.” It’s a little thing like him going out at 11 at night to go get me Twinkies if I wanted a Twinkie. Just little things like that. He’s extremely thoughtful and he’s never judged me. Like, not once. . . . I remember my da-my real dad and my stepmom were like, “No you can’t paint a room. If you want to do this, you have to do it at your mom’s.” Dan was like, “It’s just a wall.” And he told me I would probably hate it in like a year but we can always repaint it. (22:447–459)

Participants reflected on how stepparents’ actions communicated that they were indeed a daughter or son to them. One 25-year-old stepdaughter described how her stepfather confronted her landlord about a termite infestation: “I’ve never had a dad backup so that was probably the biggest turning point too. He felt more like a father. He called my kids his grandkids, no hesitation. . . . That was a really big turning point” (37:500–538). The stepchildren in this study discursively constructed the parental relationship via addressing terms (e.g., “a dad backup”, “like a father”), which was very important to building and reflecting a positive relationship.

In the analysis, we attended to changes in valence at each turning point. Five prosocial actions took place during a stressful period, such as the birth of a stepsibling (6:131–141) or as they prepared college applications, or when a stepfather became a co-signer for college loans (34:294–300). While the participants expressed appreciation for the prosocial action, they rated overall positivity slightly lower, presumably because of the overall stress of the situation at hand or ambivalence over the role of their biological parent in the corresponding event.

Overall, prosocial actions involved out-of-the-ordinary deeds that signaled a positive relationship and/or showed one had developed with the stepparent. These interactions also often provided contrast to a poor relationship with an estranged or departed nonresidential parent.

**2. Quality Time:** *“There was no question that he 100% was in the relationship.”*

Quality time was an event or episode that signaled a positive relationship was developing or had developed with the stepparent. Examples included leisure time, time away from others, and relationship talks not focused on problems. Quality time represented 16.73% of the total turning points ( $n = 45$ ) and many were positive (68.8% of instances), whereas others resulted in no change in positivity (26.6% of instances). Most of the instances of quality time created opportunities for favorable interactions. A 25-year-old stepdaughter recounted:

I was in high school, and I remember my stepdad was in the garage working on something. . . I had my first boyfriend breakup. I just needed to talk to one of my parents, and he was the first one I saw. So, I told him the whole story of what happened. And I remember crying, and he was just giving me advice about, “It hurts right now, but there will be others. You will get through this.” Just words of encouragement. (6:191–196)

In another example, a 32-year-old stepson, who was 11 when the stepfamily formed, described how he chose his stepfather to teach him to drive: “I think, my stepdad was more present, or the one I trusted more to do that. . . my stepdad was the one who I chose and took the time out to do this kind of important thing with” (13:166–171). Although most of the examples of quality time were dyadic, some involved other stepfamily members. For example, a first vacation with the new stepfamily resulted in a 30% increase in positivity with the stepparent (16:125–131).

Quality time rarely occurred early in the relationship, which is often more conflict-laden. Rather, quality time often appeared in later adolescence or adulthood as the relationship solidified and became more positive. A 28-year-old stepdaughter described her stepfather becoming closer than her biological father: “Franklin was pretty much a constant for me and he never, he never attempted to become a father-figure for me, but he let me come to him and let me set the tone

for the relationship” (30:326–332). Similarly, this 32-year-old stepson described why his adult relationship with his stepfather was 100% positive at age 27:

When I'd go visit my mom and him we would sit down and have like scotch, or a beer, or these types of things and just kind of chat. And so in that kind of context it would be like, in some ways, just kind of having bonding time between us even that wasn't necessarily with mom around. . .sit at the kitchen table and just talk about the scotch, life. . .that kind of signified he viewed me fully as an adult and someone to talk to in that type of capacity. . .I mean at that point it was just kind of the ability to sit and talk person-to-person, like kind of both like friends and family in that context. (13:283–307)

Examples of quality time also served as a signal that the positive relationship would likely persist into the future and was strong enough to stand on its own without the biological parent present. A 29-year-old stepdaughter, whose stepfamily formed at 11 years old, now rated her relationship as 100% positive and reflected, “When Mom would go out of town he would text me and ask me to come over and make pizzas. . . That was kind of cool, I guess. . . it means that our relationship can kind of survive without her” (34:750–765).

Overall, quality time involved mostly dyadic interactions, episodic or ongoing, that reflected a positive relationship with a stepparent and sometimes involved other family members. Both prosocial actions and quality time created moments of positive affect, a finding consistent with Fredrickson's (2013) notion that resilience may be fostered by such experiences.

**3. Conflict/Disagreement:** *“The big fight started at being told I couldn't go to the prom with my boyfriend. . . that was like the cherry on top.”*

Conflict/disagreement consisted of a struggle between the stepchild and stepparent and/or other stepfamily members. These turning points represented 10.04% of the total turning points ( $n = 27$ ) and were negative in 66.6% of instances, positive in 18.5%, and yielded no change in positivity in 14.8% of instances. Conflict/disagreement involved interaction, depending on the confrontational nature of the talk.

Although the stepparent relationship was described as positive overall at the time of the interview, conflicts were commonly described over such issues as curfew (3:146), parenting style (33:591),



or how to celebrate holidays (29:308). Although some conflicts involved the stepparent role, other examples would be common in any family relationship, especially during adolescence. Some events were confined to the stepchild–stepparent dyad, such as this 28-year-old stepdaughter who described a conflict with her stepmother who critiqued her behavior in the presence of her grandmother:

I just lashed out on her, a little like, “You’re a horrible person.” I called her the “b” word and I was like, “You’re so disrespectful. This is my family, not yours, and you’re sharing my private stories.” . . . I felt like she disrespected me, that I didn’t disrespect her. . . . It was probably a good month until we started talking again. . . . she called me and she felt horrible. I just remember that conversation that she was crying and she’s like, “Brenda, I didn’t mean. . . . I meant it, but I didn’t mean to be so harsh, and I didn’t mean to be the way I was. But I was almost mad at you for making those choices.” (18:320–337)

The stepdaughter viewed this episode as evidence of the relationship’s resilience. The stepmother’s willingness to apologize was a strong indicator that mutual respect was developing over time. Whereas many of these conflict episodes involved very direct or disruptive communication, most resolved within a relatively short period. Some cases, as in this last example, involved apology and reconciliation, and from the perspective of these stepchildren, stepparents mostly initiated the apologies.

Some of the conflicts extended beyond the dyad to involve the other parent and/or family members. Several conflicts occurred when parents and stepparents formed a coalition over issues of discipline. A 30-year-old stepson described conflict with his mother and stepfather over curfew his freshman year, resenting that they had banded together: “We, more myself than him, had a fall out of our relationship. . . . I would say it was just resentment. Like, ‘Oh how dare this guy try and control, my life.’ . . . I probably didn’t talk to either my mom or my stepdad for a year after that happened” (20:215–248). Now age 30 and rating the relationship with his stepfather as 95% positive, he reflected back on this conflict:

It turned out to be great. I realized after a year of being away and getting myself back into school to do what I wanted to do, that I just realized how immature I was acting. I finally took the blame off of them and I was like, “I get it. You know, I see what they were doing and I get it”. . . . They just wanted to do good by me. And once I realized that, I went back and

talked with them, apologized, and from there we really started rebuilding our relationship. . . we have actually almost a father-son type of relationship in the past three, four years that we didn't, definitely didn't have [earlier]. (20:246-272)

From the perspective of adulthood, many stepchildren reported positive relationships and were able to better understand and reconcile earlier conflicts, viewing them in more affirmative ways.

Whereas many of the conflicts resulted in a temporary decrease in positivity, in four cases, the conflict represented no change in positivity. A 32-year-old stepson described how his stepfather caught him riding his dirt bike illegally in the street: "At the time he was obviously very mad at us, but it was surprising how mad he *wasn't*. . . he was genuinely interested in our outcomes" (13:210- 214). Interestingly, in five instances positivity increased following a conflict. A 36-year-old stepdaughter recalled a fight between her mother and stepfather, taking her stepfather's side: "And I think at that moment, he looked at me and realized I was like on his side, like 'hell no, you do not talk to my father that way'" (26:315-319).

When conflict was associated with a reduction in positivity, the changes were typically modest. In these cases, participants' disclosure reflected conflicts as constructive markers of relational resilience. As adults, some viewed these events with a new perspective, as a temporary period of turbulence in a relationship that grew stronger over time, and understood this recovery from adversity as significant. These narratives of apology, insight, empathy, and solidarity signify that the relationship was stronger for having encountered hard times, creating and reflecting resilience (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012).

#### **4. Changes in Household/Family Composition:** *"Trying to understand that this was a more sort of permanent thing. Permanent life change."*

Changes in household/family composition tied in frequency with rituals and included events such as cohabitation or remarriage of the parent and stepparent (29:214), or members moving in or out of the household (6:226). These represented 7.4% of the total turning points ( $n = 20$ ) with 50% positively valenced changes, 15% negative, and 35% neutral. Many of the turning points involved the marriage of the parent and stepparent and most were identified as positive or neutral changes, as this 49-year-old stepdaughter recalled:

I was really happy, I actually gave a toast at their wedding: "I would like [to] propose a toast to the person who really made this whole thing happen, to the person who should get the credit for this wonderful marriage – here's to me!" [laughter] Because the minute Daddy died, I started praying for her to find someone, you know, saying, "Please don't let her be by herself!" So, John was an answered prayer as far as that goes. (31:240–244)

A second common event type involved the stepchild or others moving in or out of the household. In some cases (15%) this was a negative change, but more commonly was perceived as positive (50%), as with this stepchild who moved back home at age 23:

I was looking for a place and I talked to my mom, and asked her if I could move in with her and Rob. I never actually talked to Rob about it, but I presume he was fine with it. And he made a place for me to stay in his home for a second time. . .he accommodated me very graciously without saying anything about it. (10:206–214)

Being welcomed (or at least not resisted) made returning home a positive relational change.

**5. Rituals:** *"Feeling a lot of warmth and just close to her after Christmases like that. I thought, 'We're really a family.'"*

Rituals included holiday celebrations (5:120) and special events such as birthdays, graduations (17:188), or weddings (29:528) and comprised 7.4% of the total turning points ( $n = 20$ ). All but three were positively or neutrally valenced changes. We coded turning points as rituals when the event itself was the central phenomenon in participant disclosure. The most common rituals were holiday events. This 26-year-old stepson discussed:

We developed a set of shared family rituals. What we have for Christmas dinner got solidified at this point, the type of desserts that are made, who makes the desserts, new movies are added in the rotation. In my family, it's a big f-in deal. . . . So to add new movies then . . . that's a sizeable sign that things are going well here. Bonnie and I are talking a lot more over this Christmas, absent my father. . . . And there's a general sense of respect and camaraderie that sort of solidifies over this Christmas. (19:1211–1223)

This excerpt demonstrates both the positive relationship with his stepmother reflected in the ritual event and the interaction that fostered the relationship at this time.

Weddings of the stepchild or siblings were common turning points. The largest change in positivity came from a 41-year-old stepdaughter who described how her mother and stepfather paid for her sister's wedding: "It was just clear that both my mother and Emmett were sharing the costs. . . . I just felt, he just felt, well we just all felt like a real *family* that day" (33:528-540).

Overall, family rituals were positive turning points that allowed participants to reflect on the strengthening relationship. In terms used by resilience researchers such as Buzzanell (2010), our fourth and fifth categories are connected to the solidification of identity. Following a period of uncertainty, these turning points suggested a new family identity was emerging, one that clearly included a role for the maturing stepchild.

#### **6. Adult Relational Change: "OK maybe this guy isn't so bad."**

Adult relational change by one or more adults in the stepfamily household, or the other household( s), resulted in a positive relational change with a stepparent. Tied with family crisis, these comprised 7.06% of the total turning points ( $n = 19$ ), and included events such as a stepfather bonding with his stepchild's biological, nonresidential parent (29:754) and the deepening of a relationship of the biological parent and stepparent (32:357). All but three of these events were associated with positive change or neutrality. Some occurred early on, as the stepchild realized this new relationship was very positive for their parent. A stepdaughter noted, "I realized how happy he made my mom. . . . So that probably took me from. . . like ornery teenager. . . to a mindset of, 'OK maybe this guy isn't so bad'" (28:341-344). A 25-year-old stepdaughter recalled when her stepfather moved in: "To find somebody like my stepdad, who is just so nice and so giving and someone who just puts my mom up on this super-high pedestal and just thinks the world of her, I mean that was just *super awesome*" (32:363-370).

Adult relational change also involved the stepparent and adult(s) in the other household. A 27-year-old stepdaughter recalled how her stepmother, Cindy, jumped in to help with her sister's wedding, to the displeasure of their troubled biological mother:

Cindy, on the other hand, is very artistic and was able to help my sister with a lot of the wedding planning. . . . So, my mom was like, "How dare you? She's not your mother." . . . . That's when it jumped till I was like

probably a 98 to 100%. So, my mom thought she was overstepping her boundaries, I thought she was doing a great job as a new member of the family. (15:240–257)

In three cases where adult relational change was negative, the *event* was stressful (such as a family vacation, 31:543), but the discourse about the stepparent was positive.

**7. Family Crisis:** *“I started to look at my stepdad for who he was and not take him for granted.”*

Family crisis involved emergency-related events that resulted in a relational change with the stepparent, comprising 7.06% of the total turning points ( $n = 19$ ). Crises included illness (1:149), death of a family member (10:253), an accident (26:157), or a serious family problem (37:736). Only two of these events were associated with negative change. Family crisis mostly involved challenging events with positive relational implications. A 52-year-old stepdaughter explains the aftermath of her brother’s serious car accident after driving drunk:

While it is really easy to act nicely. . . where everything is happy, when the chips are down it is really hard to stay positive. . . . He [stepfather] was very solid for everyone involved . . . even though my brother had done something stupid he still claimed him. My feelings for him were 100% positive in a very un-positive situation. (2:127–132)

In another instance, a participant’s family home caught fire and a stepfather saved the stepdaughter’s little brother: “Like super human strength [he] went into the house and got my brother [starts to cry]. He saved his life. . . . I thought it was kind of incredible and I like kind of bragged about it to my friends. . . . to this day, he will always be my hero for that” (26:165–180).

In some cases, the death of a biological parent helped the stepchild to appreciate the stepparent relationship. This stepson recalled when his father died when he was 20 years old, five years after becoming a stepfamily: “At that point I really started to look at my stepdad for who he was and not take him for granted. Especially on account of the fact that he has been so wonderful to me for such an extended period of time” (10:272–274).

In other cases, family crisis centered on the stepparent. The same stepson recalled when his stepfather’s sister died and he regretted not showing his stepfather more kindness (10:245–246). Another

participant, a 39-year-old stepdaughter, noted moving home to care for her stepfather who had cancer and the positive impact this had on their relationship:

He, for the first time that I can ever remember, would say “I love you” out loud. Not just kind of I love you under his breath, an actual “I love you”. . . That’s the way I was used to with my mom, and my sister, and my dad, and my husband, and that was the affection type of family that we were, and he became more like that. You could just tell that he didn’t take things for granted. . . We talked about end of life stuff. (8:563–586)

Family crisis involved the dyad or whole family and, in most cases, positively influenced the stepchild-stepparent relationship because the stepparent was viewed as a source of strength and a “normalizing influence,” helping the family remain resilient in the face of adversity.

**8. Positive Relational Change:** *“It just seems weird to call her my stepmom. She’s more than that at this point.”*

Positive relational change involved external events that provoked affirmative changes in identity or attitude toward the stepparent or stepfamily, accounting for 6.6% of the total turning points ( $n = 18$ ). We redefined this category from Baxter et al. (1999) to account for changes in how stepchildren interacted with or identified with a stepparent. A 44-year-old stepdaughter recalled first calling her stepmother, “mom” on the instance of introducing her to others as an adult:

I feel weird still calling her Margaret because she is such a mom to me. And we’ve had those conversations too. She doesn’t expect it. They’re so used to being Paul and Margaret now it doesn’t faze them, but to me sometimes it doesn’t feel like a fitting response, you know? So, if she’s visiting us and I’m introducing her I’ll just say “this is my mom” to people that I don’t know very well because it just seems weird to call her my stepmom. She’s more than that at this point. (11:301–307)

Some positive change occurred in adulthood, such as seeing the stepfather act as a grandfather (33:557) or reflecting, “We could have a conversation, we could laugh, we could tell jokes, we could be adults with each other . . . no grounding, no arguing” (34:684–686).

We also saw examples of the relationship becoming more positive as the stepchild witnessed parenting they judged as constructive. For example, one stepson explained: “So there was this new sense of how my

stepmother was maturing as a parent, you know, and learning how to be effective around the parenting thing. . . This moved my relationship up to maybe a 60% with my stepmother” (25:269–274). A key theme was relationship growth as time passed, circumstances changed, and perspectives matured, which represent enactments of what resilience theorists view as optimization or thriving (Zautra, 2009). In other words, rather than merely cope with their relational circumstances, they find new and more productive ways of thinking and being.

**9. Reconciliation/Problem-Solving:** *“OK, come get me. I want to be home.”*

Reconciliation/problem-solving involved a prior conflict now framed as relationally positive. We differentiated this from conflict/disagreement by its emphasis on resolution of prior difficulties and post-estrangement reconciliation. The majority of these turning points were overwhelmingly positive (83.3%) and, when combined with unmet expectations, comprise 4.4% of the total ( $n = 12$ ) and involved the stepchild-stepparent dyad (20:277) or family members (4:150). Stepchildren described resolution of earlier conflicts, as did this 27-year-old who called her stepfather on July 4th:

He had somebody else go shoot off fireworks so I could sit there via Face Time and watch them. That to me was kind of like, he really, really, really cares and loves me [starts to cry] . . . And that’s also the night, that um, he asked me if, um, I wanted to come home and be with him and my mom. . . “Denise, I want you to come home. Please come home.” And I was like “OK, come get me. I want to be home.” (22:307–318)

After drug counseling, a stepdaughter described reestablishing the relationship with her father and stepmother (4:140–150). For many, the turning point reflected maturation: “I finally realized how childish my behavior had been and took it upon myself to apologize and try to rebuild the relationship” (20:277–279). A stepdaughter described forgiving her stepdad in adulthood:

I was lost for several years and I was trying to figure out who I was. . . I tried to put myself in my mom’s place. . . and who was I to be some selfish kid and hold it against her, because at some point. . . He took on a family. And helped raise us . . . he keeps trying to be our dad. . . You know, why am I holding all this anger towards this man . . . I was just over it, “You know what. I don’t hate you anymore.” (38:367–390)

Forgiveness has been linked to relational resilience in marriages and families (Waldron, 2017; Waldron & Kelley, 2009) and also appears to play an important role in the reports in this category.

**10. Unmet Expectations or Disappointment:** *“I was pissed off, so I just kept to myself.”*

Unmet expectations or disappointment were precipitated by the (in)action of the stepparent or other family members, but were not communicated in the same way as were the conflict situations described earlier. Tied with reconciliation/problem-solving, this category comprised 4.4% of the total ( $n = 12$ ). Nine instances were associated with negative change and two were neutral. One stepson described disappointment that his father and stepmother had not intervened when a sibling was failing school. Another 27-year-old stepson was upset that his parent and stepparent failed to attend sporting events, recalling, “I didn’t talk to them or talk shit. I was still respectful to them, but I was pissed off so, I just kept to myself” (23:258–260).

These turning points were negative, as the stepchildren wished for relationships that did not exist at the time (relationships that were ultimately positive). It may be that enduring disappointment was a means of “keeping the peace” during disruptive times until negative feelings subsided or the stepchild came to realize his or her expectations for the stepparent were unrealistic at the time. Had the stepchildren confronted their unmet expectations, such situations may have escalated into an unmanageable conflict.

**11. Relocation or Geographic Move for Household:** *“I had my own bedroom by myself, and things like that!”*

Relocation involved a move of the stepfamily household, whether the move was within the same geographic city, or to a different city, state, or country. These eight instances represented 2.9% of the total turning points and were positive or neutrally valenced in all but one case. Although participants did not report direct interaction with the stepparent during the move, feelings about relocation seemed to translate to increased positivity about the relationship, especially when participants were moving back to their home city.

For some stepchildren, relocation signaled that the stepfamily was indeed a *family*. One stepdaughter recalled moving in as a stepfamily when she was 12 years old: “I certainly remember the move and



moving into a bigger house because I had my own bedroom by myself, and things like that!” (33:402–406). Several stepchildren expressed significance at getting their own room: “So that was like the coolest part” (23:130–132). In the one negative relocation case, a stepdaughter recalled moving from a house to an apartment in another state and living with her father and stepmother for the first time:

I’m sharing a room with my younger sister and the cat litter box is stashed in our bathroom, and we’re all in very tight quarters. None of us have ever really been in very tight quarters. . . . this was just trying in general for the family, the general decline here with my relation with Barb. She wanted me to do a bunch of shit I didn’t wanna do. Not that I didn’t like her, I was still [a] little positive, but there’s a lot of, sort of this friction getting used to somebody else being in what you would consider to be your space, and they consider as exclusively their space, for they’re paying the bill. (19:548–564)

Relocation provided both opportunities and challenges, but was positive, especially when stepchildren perceived sufficient space and their needs were accommodated.

**12. Social Network Related:** “*Grandma said, ‘Just don’t know how you got so lucky twice.’*”

Turning points coded as social network related involved extended family, including grandparents, step-grandparents, or friends. There were eight instances (2.9% of the total turning points) split between positive and negative relationship change. In positive cases, members of the social network supported the stepparent or stepchild. A 49-year-old stepdaughter recalled the joy her grandmother expressed as her stepfather joined the family: “James was just, he’s a mid-western guy just like my dad was, and so Grandma oh just loved him!” (33:443–457).

In the negative cases, interactions with the social network reinforced negative feelings about the stepparent. For example, a stepdaughter recalls a friend whose parents were divorcing: “I finally kind of understood. Because my parents had already been divorced . . . that was when I realized, ‘OK, wow this guy is here and my dad is not. So, it must be his fault’” (38:278–281).

As Zautra (2009) noted, resilience involves not just recovery, but also sustainability. The support of a social network can help people persist in new patterns of behavior. Social network related turning points

provided important evidence that family and friends also influence the trajectory of stepfamily relationships that were ultimately positive.

**13. Negative Relational Change:** “I thought he was a terrible person.”

Negative relational change represented an alteration in identity or attitude toward the stepparent or stepfamily, provoked by external events. This category accounted for 2.9% of the total ( $n = 8$ ) and mirrored its positive counterpart. Given our focus, it is not surprising we coded very few negative change events. Coders experienced some challenges identifying these events (agreement was an acceptable 77% before discussion), in part due to some overlap with the conflict category. The research team distinguished the focus to be not on the event or conflict, but the alteration to the stepchild–stepparent relationship.

Most of these turning points were dyadic and involved a redefinition of the stepchild–stepparent relationship in some way. This 30-year-old stepdaughter reflected on the remarriage when she was 12 years old:

When my stepdad and my mom got married, we had a very negative relationship. I didn't want the marriage, I didn't like him at all. I thought he was a terrible person. I didn't care, I didn't see when I was 12, that he made my mom happy and that was really the only thing that needed to matter. I protested the wedding profusely, and we had a very negative relationship for a very long time. (35:176–180)

This stepdaughter's general disapproval of the remarriage and the unwelcome change in her family of origin shaped her views of the stepfather at that time.

Other instances of negative relational change involved a specific traumatizing event related to the stepparent. For instance, a stepson blamed his stepmother when the family got rid of the family dog: “We used kind of used it as fuel. . . All three of us blamed her . . . we didn't hate her, we just didn't really want her around . . . she wasn't our mom” (23:73–92). Although there were few instances of negative relational change, what stood out was that even some positive relationships included unwelcome events attributed to the presence of a stepparent.

## Discussion

In the present study, we transformed an existing typology of turning points (Baxter et al., 1999) to reflect positive stepchild-stepparent relationships as negotiated and enacted over the life of the stepfamily. We elucidate the discursive construction and interaction of these relationships at points of development and change. Our findings partially corroborate and expand earlier research, yielding insights about the developmental events and relational discourse that might foster resilience in stepfamilies, focusing on how resilience grows and changes over the years with ongoing sense-making and experience (Buzzanell, 2010). Given the mean age of 33 years, these stepchildren had time to engage in sense-making about their experiences (Papernow, 2013).

Prosocial actions and quality time accounted for a third of the turning points and were associated with positive relationship change in the present study, as compared to the earlier study (Baxter et al., 1999). While this finding may not be a surprise, it is important, as we reflect on how stepparents positively violated expectations and showed unexpected consideration when stepchildren felt distrustful or alienated. Stepparents were open about their feelings through their actions and in their talk. The powerful emotional signature of these actions often manifested nonverbally during the interview, as some stepchildren cried and others expressed relief and joy; this supports past scholars' work that identified the long-term emotional effects of positive everyday interaction. Such interactions include establishing a greater openness in stepfamilies (e.g., Golish, 2003), finding a style of parenting that works well for them and their stepchildren (often a friendship style), and focusing on developing a positive relationship and earning stepchildren's trust (Coleman, Ganong, & Russell, 2013).

Importantly, the experience of positive emotion can have significant reorienting effects during and after adversity. Fredrickson (2013) contrasted positive emotional experiences with negative emotions. Negative emotional states, such as anger and fear, facilitate rapid, survival-enhancing responses to threat, but in the long-term, lead to more rigid response patterns. In contrast, positive emotions may expand response flexibility and activate a range of cognitive functions that spark adaptability and more complex connections to the social world. This dovetails the Metts et al. (2013) finding that affirmative

everyday interactions with stepparents increase stepchildren's positive emotions. If positive stepfamily relationships are characterized by adaptability, as we suggest above, prosocial actions and quality time may be the means by which it is cultivated. Taking an applied turn, we emphasize to parents and stepparents that these actions involve little effort, time, special skill, or financial investment, yet hold great meaning to stepchildren.

We also found that even positive stepchild–stepparent interaction and relationships are not without conflicts and disagreement. Conflict ranked third in frequency in our study and second in the Baxter et al. (1999) study. Conflicts can have important relational outcomes (e.g., Canary & Canary, 2013). In these present data, positive or neutral associations appeared in a third of the cases, as compared to the nearly unanimous negativity voiced in the 1999 study. We suggest that changing roles and reforming relationships may yield conflicts that are particularly potent and valuable for stepchildren and the stepfamily. Although some conflicts were associated with initial negative relationship change, in many cases, participants came to see a silver lining. This optimism was especially apparent when stepparents admitted fault, offered a sincere apology, or communicated in ways that encouraged stepchildren to persevere in the relationship. This insight supports findings by Coleman et al. (2001) that conflict can stimulate stepfamily relationships “when it is accompanied by thoughtful discussions and compromise” (p. 71). It may be that conflicts jointly survived by family members distinguish positive stepfamily relationships. The discourse of survival is an echo of that described by resilience researchers, who argue for the value of shared stories to solidify relational identities and foster persistence in the face of new challenges (Beck & Socha, 2015; Buzzanell, 2010).

Third, changes in household or family composition played a prominent role in both the present study and especially the Baxter et al. (1999) study. In positive stepparent relationships, changes in household, coupled with other change-related turning points (e.g., adult relational change, relocation) represented milestones in navigating stepfamily boundaries and were associated with positive or neutral relational impact. Depictions of stepfamily life often emphasize its tenuous and risk-filled nature, but we found positive stepparenting relationships often welcomed change. For example, the stepparent often brought emotional or financial stability, or relief to a stepchild by

giving joy to the biological parent. This insight can be understood as the resilience process of crafting normalcy (Buzzanell, 2010), as stepchildren often appreciated returning to the legitimacy of being a complete “real family” or joining stepsiblings they valued.

This theme of welcomed stability is echoed in a recent study of families that weathered difficult economic times (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012). Children who perceived their parents to be in control and facilitating the family through turbulent circumstances, perceived a sense of calm and stability. Our participants reflected favorably on stepparents who were present, engaged, and reliable, sometimes in place of a biological parent who was less so or absent. We saw stepparent stability reflected in other turning points, for example in family crisis, as stepparents were helpful in times of trouble. The high incidence of positivity about change in the present study lead us to agree with Baxter and colleagues (1999), who argued that positive perception of change is a sign of healthy adaptation on the part of stepchildren. Although change in stepfamily configuration can increase the stress in a stepfamily, we are able to highlight how a stabilizing stepparent role can be a defining characteristic of positive stepfamily relationships and function to promote family resilience.

Fourth, family rituals were identified as a positively valenced turning point in the present study and the earlier (Baxter et al., 1999) study, although positive reactions were more common in the present investigation. Successful ritual enactment is important to family health and identity (e.g., Wolin & Bennett, 1984) and in stepfamily adjustment as well (Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998). Successful family rituals can provide a framework for Buzzanell’s (2010) resilience processes of crafting normalcy and creating and maintaining communication networks, such as when old rituals are adapted or new ones enacted. Some of our participants welcomed the resumption of rituals like holiday celebrations as a signal that “normal” family life had resumed after a period of unwanted flux. Rituals were perceived as positive when the stepparent accepted the rituals of the “old” family or when the stepfamily adapted the ritual in a way that allowed them to honor both the “old” and “new” families, as Braithwaite et al. (1998) found. Ritual enactments highlighted reintegration to configuring and reconnecting family ties disrupted by divorce, death, or remarriage in these positive relationships. Moreover, rituals offered opportunities to negotiate stepfamily change. Here again, we

see evidence that resilience is enacted via social and discursive practices (Buzzanell, 2010; Zautra, 2009).

Several integrating themes emerge from the present study that have practical implications for stepfamily development and enactment. The first involves identity work by the stepparent, stepchild, and the larger family network. Stepchildren often experience identity challenges, especially early on (e.g., Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Papernow, 2013). Some identity threats are intensified by challenges with legitimizing the stepfamily (Galvin, 2006), and role confusion following divorce and the stepparent's entrance into a changed family system (Baxter et al., 2004). In these positive relationships, stepparents often proved helpful during these adjustment periods, engaging in practices that bolstered the child's confidence and cultivated hope. It is important to stress that effects of the positive relationship were not just one direction; many of the stepchildren believed they helped stepparents solidify their roles. Our findings point to positive stepfamily relationships as a collective effort of creating and supporting affirmative identities.

A second integrating theme involves communication beyond the stepchild-stepparent dyad to include other stepfamily members, extended family, and the social network. Martialing support from the social network is an important aspect of resilience (e.g., Buzzanell, 2010; Coleman et al., 2013; Zautra, 2009), and we saw that even during times of turbulence with the stepparent, social network members (especially grandparents) could provide buffering and support. When support is not forthcoming or extended family members increase stress, stepchildren have a more difficult experience (DiVerniero, 2013). Positive social network interactions have the potential to affirm the stepparent relationship and provide approval, offering assurance that the present and future of the stepfamily could be positive.

A third integrating theme involves the role of forgiveness and reconciliation. Several participants commented explicitly on forgiveness, particularly after periods of extreme conflict. They described initiating or seeking forgiveness from the stepparent, or forgiving the stepparent after an apology. In short, for many of these families, forgiveness was instrumental in healing hurt feelings, wounds, or the disappointment of unmet expectations. Waldron and Kelley (2008, 2009) highlighted the importance of forgiveness in close relationships, often implicitly, wherein transgressions are acknowledged, apologies offered, and reconciliation sought, all without articulating "I forgive you."

Some stepchildren described the need to forgive themselves for behavior that they now considered immature, self-absorbed, or thoughtless. In the present study, forgiveness was implicit and/or explicit within several turning point categories, such as conflict/disagreement and problem solving/reconciliation. Forgiveness may be instrumental in transforming stepfamily relationships, especially with stepparents.

The first-marriage family is rapidly becoming a minority, and post-modern family forms are increasingly discourse-dependent (Baxter, 2014; Galvin, 2006). In the past, the resilient family might dodge divorce and persist over time, but researchers now seek to illuminate how families remain resilient in a period of contested family roles and less predictable lifespan trajectories. We believe our turning point typology is a helpful starting place for stepfamilies seeking to understand their experience and for researchers wanting to enlighten post-modern family types.

We recognize that our investigation has limitations, which create opportunities for researchers, and several challenges remain for researchers of stepfamily resilience. First, we are cognizant that, despite recruiting in the Midwest and Southwest U.S., most of our participants were Caucasian women. This leads us to ask how, if at all, the turning point typology might evolve as we seek perspectives from groups underrepresented in these data. A related limitation is that by design, we sought perspectives of stepchildren, a shortcoming that could be overcome if future scholars wanted to recruit the dyad, although we have been hesitant to do this in stepfamilies where the relationships may be more fragile, even if not in this particular dyad. Second, it seems likely that positive relationships develop along several different developmental trajectories (see Ganong et al., 2011). We identify crucial developmental events and researchers can do more to plot these changes over time, identify variations in these sequences, and plot the ages at which key events (e.g., divorce, remarriage) occur in relationships that ultimately become positive. Third, additional comparative research, above and beyond our comparison to the often-referenced Baxter et al. (1999) study, would be useful in identifying turning points in positive and negative stepparenting relationships. Fourth, because our respondents often overcame hurt and adversity, additional research is needed on the role of (un)forgiving communication in helping families negotiate negative turning points (Waldron, 2017). Fifth, we suggest that it is fruitful to view positive

stepfamilies through the lens of resilience (Coleman et al., 2013; Zautra, 2009) and to focus on the role of communication in enacting resilience (Buzzanell, 2010). From this perspective, researchers ask why some stepparenting relationships survive and even thrive despite adversity, whereas others appear to be quite brittle. We encourage continuing examination of communication practices that foster resilient, successful, and ultimately positive stepfamilies.

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