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Adolescent Stress As It Relates To Stepfamily Living

Joanna Ford Strother

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West Virginia University

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ADOLESCENT STRESS AS IT RELATES TO STEPFAMILY LIVING

DISSERTATION

Submitted To The Graduate School
Of
West Virginia University
In Partial Fulfillment Of The Requirements For
The Degree Of Doctor Of Education

by

Jo Anna Strother

Morgantown
West Virginia

1981

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The study of the American family is of major importance and interest to the helping professionals. Eisenberg and Patterson (1979) contend that the family is the most powerful determinant of one's personality. In recent years our society has experienced various changes in family lifestyles. Toffler (1980), the author of Future Shock, in his latest book, The Third Wave, discusses the growing changes in our family systems. The nuclear family may no longer be the ideal model for society. A new family system is emerging which consists of a diversity of household structures, which includes the stepfamily. Glick and Norton (1979) predict from their demographic research that the "typical" American family has changed from the traditional nuclear family, with the divorce rate increasing since 1960. Glick (1979) indicates that the percentage of children under 18 living with their two natural parents will decline from 73% in 1960 to 56% in 1990, with 10.2% of all children under 18 living with one natural parent and a stepparent in 1978. Messinger, Walker, and Freeman (1978) state, "the nuclear family of parents and their biological children continues to be portrayed as the 'normal family' despite the growing number of persons living in remarriage families" (p. 263). Thus it appears that experts in the field agree that the stepfamily has emerged as a significant family system in the United States; therefore, the

effects of living in a stepfamily need to be studied.

The stepfamily is defined as a family formed by two adults, one of which has a child or children from a former marriage (Lutz, 1980). Although the stepfamily is not a new family living arrangement, it deserves greater attention from researchers in light of the rapid growth in the number of stepfamilies. Ransom, Schlesinger, and Deryn (1979) comment: "the rising divorce rate and the high incidence of remarriage among both divorced and widowed persons has resulted in the stepfamily becoming an increasingly common family form in our modern society" (p. 36).

Visher and Visher (1979) report that in 1964 it was estimated that there were eight million children living in stepfamilies, and by 1975 there were 15 million children living in stepfamilies. During approximately the same time span, from 1965 to 1976, the divorce rate in the United States has doubled (Glick & Norton, 1979). Much of the growth in the number of stepfamilies is because of the rising divorce rate and the incidence of remarriage in the United States. Glick (1979) in his demographic review of children of divorce goes on to report that close to 60% of divorced couples have one or more children below the age of 13. Twenty-eight percent of all minors in 1976 had parents that had divorced at least one time, and this may increase to one-third of all children under the age of 18 by 1990. Capaldi and McRae (1979) estimate that 75% of single parents do remarry, and most of these do so within three years.

Despite the increasing need for investigation, training, and education for therapists, the amount of research in the area of the

stepfamily is limited. "There has been very little consideration given to the problems of stepfamilies by the public or by mental health professionals" (Visher & Visher, 1978, p. 252). Lutz (1980) reinforces this need by stating, "as the incidence of remarriage following divorce continues to rise significantly, there is an increasing need for clinicians and social scientists to examine the unique characteristics of the remarriage family" (p. 2).

The growing need for more sound, scientifically-based knowledge and understanding of the stepfamily milieu is evident. Messinger, et al. (1978) found that of the 70 divorced-remarried couples they interviewed, many expressed regret that there was little professional help available. Messinger (1976) indicated that individuals who have children and remarry face problems for which they are unprepared. She contends that preparatory courses for these families are necessary in order to help them cope with their specific problems.

Ransom, et al. (1979) state, "it is important for mental health clinicians to better understand the reconstituted family form in its own right, and to develop clinical skills in helping adults and children involved in remarriage to establish a workable family system" (pp. 36-37). "The stepfamily has certain unique problems which tend both to intensify the normally existing family conflicts and tensions and to create some new ones that stem from the joining of two family groups in which the children are biologically related to only one parent" (Schulman, 1972, p. 131). Goldstein (1974) indicates that the blending of two previously established "part-families" is a stressful process.

The blending of two families is potentially stressful for all stepfamily members. Researchers have studied the special problems faced by stepmothers, stepfathers, absentee parents, stepsiblings, and halfsiblings. In her 1976 study of 70 remarried couples, Messinger (1976) reported that these couples ranked child rearing as the greatest source of difficulty. Further studies and research indicate that adolescent stepchildren seem to have the most difficulty adjusting to the blending process. Capaldi and McRae (1979) state, "a family relationship that involves a stepparent and an adolescent presents a particularly difficult problem much different from any problems encountered by a stepparent and a younger child" (p. 92).

In their review of remarriage after divorce, Walker, Rogers, and Messinger (1977) reveal that the literature is lacking in the study of the adjustment of stepfamily members to aspects of stepfamily life that lead to stress, and they further report that the older the stepchild at the onset of the remarriage the more susceptible the child will be to poor mental health. Rosenbaum and Rosenbaum (1977) suggest that adolescents often have a great deal of internal conflict, and that this period of their life is psychologically difficult. They further contend that teenage stepchildren are the most difficult to parent. Visher and Visher (1979) reason that one difficulty for adolescent stepchildren is that they have a longer history related to their biological family. They further state, "because adolescents have developed to the point where they have become differentiated from their parents and are cognitively mature enough to observe what is going on around them psychologi-

cally, they can figure out that their parents and stepparents are themselves feeling insecure in their new roles" (p. 195). The adolescent is attempting to break away and find a place as an adult; stepfamily adjustment may compound the adolescent's growth process.

Much of the adolescent literature supports this developmental theme of the adolescent movement from childhood dependence toward a greater involvement and interaction with the world. Elkind (1970) describes early adolescence, beginning at age 11 or 12, as a time when adolescents begin to conceptualize their own thoughts and begin to anticipate the reaction of others. Elkind further describes the development of the adolescent as a diminishing of the egocentrism of childhood and early adolescence by age 15 or 16. This later adolescence stage is also characterized by more formal operations of thought and more realistic reactions to others involved in the adolescent's life.

Kagan and Coles (1972) also describe adolescence as a developmental process with the goal being autonomy. They divide adolescence into two stages: early adolescence, ages 12-15, and later adolescence, ages 16-20.

Because adolescence is a developmental growing process, it would be valuable to ascertain the degree of stress experienced by adolescent stepchildren at varying stages in the adolescent process. It seems that adolescent stepchildren would react and adjust differently to the blending process depending on the age of the adolescent stepchild at the time of the remarriage.

Lutz (1980) addressed the stressful aspects of stepfamily adjustment for the adolescent. She concurs with the literature that adolescents are confronted with more difficulties during the blending process. Stepchildren that enter the stepfamily during adolescence must face the difficulties confronting all stepfamily members during the initial blending process, and they must also deal with the special stresses facing most adolescents as a result of the developmental process. Lutz (1980) also contends that the first two years of stepfamily life are the most difficult for stepfamily members. The results of her study of adolescent stress in relationship to the stepfamily indicate that there is more likelihood of stress if an adolescent has spent less than two years in the stepfamily rather than two or more years in the stepfamily.

Visher and Visher (1978) state, "our clinical impression is that the first three to four years of remarriage are the years in which the strains result in a splitting apart of the stepfamily or in the working out of some viable, though not necessarily satisfying, solutions" (p. 258).

Statement of the Problem

Therapists' and stepfamily members' understanding of the stress that adolescent stepchildren face in the initial blending process of the stepfamily can be of great benefit to adolescent stepchildren who enter the stepfamily during their adolescent years. Lutz' (1980) study is the first of its kind that identifies what adolescents perceive to be stressful or not stressful in terms of stepfamily living.

Her research is an important contribution to the study of stepfamily life. Lutz states:

Given the fact that the divorce rate is higher in remarriages with stepchildren and that the most difficult time for a child to adjust to remarriage is during adolescence, it would be valuable to ascertain what areas of stepfamily living are perceived to be the most stressful by adolescents and if these areas coincide or differ with those suggested by the current literature (p. 5-6).

Lutz' (1980) research focuses on adolescents and their perceptions of what is stressful for them as stepchildren. She found that if an adolescent has lived less than two years in a stepfamily as opposed to two or more years, there is a greater likelihood for stress for that adolescent. However, of the 103 subjects in the Lutz study, only 20 of the subjects entered their stepfamily during their adolescent years, a time which the literature emphasizes as the most difficult developmental stage for entrance into stepfamily life. Also, of the 103 subjects, only 24 subjects had been living in a stepfamily less than two years.

Since adolescents are designated in much of the literature as having the greatest difficulty adjusting to stepfamily life, and because the Lutz (1980) study found that the first two years of stepfamily life are the most stressful for adolescents, it would be important to study what is stressful for stepchildren who enter the stepfamily during adolescence. It would also be valuable to ascertain if the initial stresses faced by adolescents when they enter a stepfamily diminish in relation to the length of time spent in the stepfamily.

It would be valuable to follow-up aspects of the Lutz (1980)

study and expand the area concerned with stepchildren who enter the stepfamily during adolescence, and time spent in a stepfamily as it relates to stress for adolescents.

Since the literature indicates that the older the stepchild the more difficult the blending process, it would be valuable to determine what is stressful for adolescent stepchildren grouped according to their age in relation to the time spent in the stepfamily.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the areas of stress that stepchildren who entered the stepfamily during adolescence reported to be stressful or non-stressful in stepfamily life, and to determine if those adolescents who have spent more time in the stepfamily express a lower level of stress than those adolescents who had spent less time in the stepfamily. This study is an expansion of the Lutz (1980) study.

The Lutz (1980) study investigated what was stressful and non-stressful for 103 adolescent stepchildren who entered the stepfamily at various ages. This study investigated what was stressful or non-stressful only for adolescents who entered their stepfamily from the ages of 13 to 18. This study also addressed the issue of time spent in a stepfamily by comparing the mean stress scores for adolescents who lived in the stepfamily for less than two years, two to three years, three to four years, and four to six years.

This study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. Which of the 12 areas of stepfamily life designated as significant throughout the literature are reported to be stressful and non-stressful by adolescents who entered the stepfamily during adolescence?
2. Does the level of stress for adolescent stepchildren diminish over time when comparing adolescents living in a stepfamily less than two years, two to three years, three to four years, and four to six years?

Contribution of the Study

The need for further study of stepfamily living is stated by researchers in the literature. Lutz (1980) states, "clearly, all the evidence is not available about stepfamily living" (p. 105). Lutz further indicates a need to study stepchildren and the issues that vary among them because of their ages and developmental tasks. This study attempted to add validation to the Lutz study and to expand the study by providing new information related to the level of stress for adolescents that entered the stepfamily during their adolescent years.

This study also provided information concerning the amount of time spent in the stepfamily and how it relates to the level of stress of adolescent stepchildren who entered the stepfamily between the ages of 13 and 18.

The information obtained in this study will be of value to helping professionals and therapists working with stepfamily members.

Specifically, the information will be valuable to professionals who are assisting the adolescent stepchild's adaptation to stepfamily life. Most importantly, the results of this study may directly or indirectly be of help to stepfamily members in their quest for family harmony by providing information that may facilitate stepparents' understanding of their adolescent stepchildren.

The subjects that participated in this study were adolescent stepchildren from two school systems. This factor helped to eliminate some biases of previous studies in which the samples were drawn from exclusively clinical populations.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited by the following:

1. There were 63 subjects in this study. It would be valuable to have a greater number of subjects.
2. This study was not a longitudinal study. It would be valuable to measure stress of a particular group of adolescent stepchildren over time.
3. The subjects that participated in this study were not selected randomly. This factor may skew the data in some manner.
4. The data were reported in terms of mean stress scores. It is impossible to determine if significant differences have occurred.

Definition of Terms

Stepfamily: A family in which one or both parents have a child or children from a previous union, not necessarily living in the same household. Other terms for the stepfamily are: blended family

and reconstituted family.

Nuclear family: A family in which a child or children live with both biological parents.

Stepchild: A child whose natural parent has remarried.

Stepfather: A man who is married to a woman who has a child or children from a previous marriage.

Stepmother: A woman who is married to a man who has a child or children from a previous marriage.

Stepparent: Stepfather or stepmother.

Stepbrother: The son of one's stepparent by a former marriage (Lutz, 1980).

Stepsister: The daughter of one's stepparent by a former marriage.

Stepsibling: Stepbrother or stepsister.

Half brother: A brother to whom one is related through one parent.

Half sister: A sister to whom one is related through one parent.

Half sibling: Half brother or half sister.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Each year one million of America's youth become stepchildren (Maddox, 1975). Duberman (1975) contends that although numerous studies are available dealing with marriage, family, and divorce, the number of studies pertaining to stepfamilies is few. Walker, Rogers, and Messinger (1977) indicate that there is a major gap in the stepfamily literature concerning the stressful aspects of remarriage. They also report that the stepfamily literature is lacking in the description of demographic characteristics, the utilization of large, representative random samples, and longitudinal studies that will aid professionals in studying the stepfamily over time.

This chapter will review the currently available stepfamily literature. This review will be presented in five sections: (1) a review of research studies pertaining to stepfamilies; (2) a review of research studies pertaining specifically to adolescent stepchildren; (3) a review of articles and books pertaining to stepfamilies; (4) a review of the literature pertaining to the 12 categories of stepfamily living investigated in this study; and (5) a review of the literature pertaining to the demographic factors investigated in this study.

Research Studies Pertaining to Stepfamilies

Bernard (1956) studied 2,009 remarriages. This study provided

the basis for most of the empirical data used by reviewers for the next two decades. Data were collected through a written questionnaire. Bernard concluded that step relationships may be healthier than the problem-filled, first-marriage relationships; however, stepfamilies do face unique problems foreign to the nuclear family. There are several limitations to this study. First, only about 80% of the remarriages were true stepfamilies. Bernard did not interview the stepfamily members in this study. Instead, she used informants who knew the members of the remarriage families. Walker, et al. (1977) state, "the sample is large (2,009) but the method of sampling, utilizing students, colleagues, and friends of the author as informants, and the mode of data collection place severe limitations on the generalization, let alone the presumed validity of the study" (p. 280).

Messinger (1976) interviewed 70 remarried couples. The couples that participated in this study responded to a media request for subjects. This factor may have biased the results of the study. The couples that responded to the media request may have been experiencing difficulty in stepfamily living. Therefore, couples who were successfully adjusting to stepfamily living may have been inadvertently excluded. Messinger reported that the majority of the subjects indicated that their roles in the stepfamily were ambiguous, especially in terms of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. She also suggests that other potential areas of stress may be the linkage of the children to their parent outside the home, finances, and communication between family members. When asked to rank order

areas around which overt conflict occurred, the respondents ranked child-rearing as their greatest source of difficulty. The couples also indicated a need for remarriage preparation courses.

Duberman (1975) has published the most comprehensive descriptive study of the stepfamily issue. Her sample consisted of 88 remarriage couples. Except for the exclusion of the minority population, her subjects were fairly representative of the county (Cuyahoga County, Ohio) population in terms of income and religion. The couples were first interviewed together. Following this interview, each subject was interviewed individually while the other partner responded to a questionnaire. Duberman attempted to ascertain a Family Integration Score which represented the linkages and relationships within the remarriage family. Generally her results suggest that: (1) child rearing was the major problem faced by the remarriage family; (2) family integration was higher when the marital partners had been widowed rather than divorced; (3) the likelihood of a good relationship between stepfather and stepchild was greater than that of stepmother and stepchild; and (4) the relationship of the husband and wife had a great influence upon the stepparent/stepchild relationship. One limitation of these findings is that they do not include the stepchild's point of view concerning stepfamily life.

Fast and Cain (1965) conducted a study of stepfamilies based upon 50 case records from inpatient and outpatient child guidance settings. This sample represents a population with special charac-

teristics. The results cannot be generalized to other segments of society (Lutz, 1980). More research is needed in which the results are based upon responses from a large, random sample of society. Research based upon the memory of professionals who have worked with stepfamily members will not meet this need.

Research Studies Pertaining to Adolescent Stepchildren

Sources in the literature indicate that adolescent stepchildren may face more stress upon entrance into the stepfamily than do younger stepchildren. Bernard (1956) asserts that the general consensus among remarried parents seems to be that adolescents seem to assimilate to a new parent less easily than do younger children and grown children.

Lutz (1980) conducted the most recent and comprehensive research study dealing with adolescent stepchildren. This study attempted to ascertain which areas of stepfamily living were stressful and non-stressful for adolescent stepchildren. The 103 subjects that participated in this study were adolescent stepchildren from five schools in Monongalia County, West Virginia. The subjects responded to a questionnaire which attempted to measure the adolescents' perceptions of stepfamily stress in 11 areas which were cited in the stepfamily literature as potentially stressful. The 11 areas were: (1) discipline; (2) divided loyalty; (3) biological parent elsewhere; (4) member of two households; (5) desire for natural parents to reunite; (6) unrealistic expectations; (7) social attitudes; (8) compounded loss; (9) family constellation; (10)

sexual matters; and (11) pseudomutuality.

For each question included in the questionnaire, the subjects could have responded: (a) stressful; (b) not stressful; and (c) does not apply. From the responses of the subjects, a Perceived Level of Stress score was computed for each of the 11 areas investigated. The subjects also responded to a demographic data form from which the following was obtained: (a) number of years in the stepfamily; (b) residence of the stepfamily; (c) reason for dissolution of the nuclear family; (d) presence of a stepmother or stepfather; (e) age of stepparents; (f) presence of stepsiblings; (g) presence of halfsiblings; (h) stepsiblings' kinship with stepmother; (i) stepsiblings' kinship with stepfather; (j) length of time the child spent with a single parent before the remarriage; and (k) age at which the child became a member of the stepfamily.

The results indicated that the areas of discipline and divided loyalty were significantly stressful for the subjects. The two areas that were the least stressful for the subjects were being a member of two households and social attitudes. Lutz also found that if an adolescent had spent zero to two years rather than two or more years in a stepfamily, there was a greater likelihood of stress. Subjects who lived with stepsiblings had more likelihood of stress, and subjects who had experienced the death of a natural parent rather than the divorce of their natural parents had a greater likelihood of stress.

This study is significant because it was based upon responses from volunteer adolescents outside the clinical population. It was

the first of its kind which attempted to ascertain what adolescents perceive as stressful and non-stressful in stepfamily living. Previous studies have utilized instruments for which no reliability coefficients were reported. Lutz administered the questionnaire twice to 48 subjects to establish test-retest reliability.

One limitation to this study was the choice of responses on the questionnaire and their representation of the intensity of the subjects' perceived stress. The subjects could have responded: (a) stressful, (b) not stressful, and (c) does not apply. There is no method to ascertain the true meaning of the subjects' responses in terms of the "not stressful" and "does not apply" responses. For example, a subject who does not have stepsiblings could have answered "not stressful" to questions pertaining to stepsiblings. "Does not apply" would have been the true answer for that type of question. Also, the sample was not drawn randomly.

Secondly, the literature suggests that adolescence is the most difficult time to enter into a stepfamily. Most of the subjects in this study had entered their stepfamily prior to adolescence. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to describe what adolescents perceive as stressful upon entrance into stepfamily life during their adolescent years.

An earlier study which investigated the adjustment of adolescent stepchildren to stepfamily living was conducted by Bowerman and Irish (1962). The researchers constructed Child-Parent Adjustment Scales from the data collected through questionnaires administered to 26,855 high school students of which 2,145 were stepchildren.

The researcher concluded that homes involving step-relationships were more likely to have stress than homes representing other forms of family living. The adolescents indicated that stepmothers have more difficult roles than stepfathers, stepdaughters generally manifested more extreme reactions toward their stepparents than did stepsons, and the presence of a stepparent in the home diminished the level of adjustment of the child to their natural parent. The information derived from this study was based on a large, random sample of adolescents. This study is methodologically superior to many other studies, but is limited in that the data were obtained from only one member of the remarriage family (Walker, et al., 1977).

Burchinal (1964) found no significant differences in personal and social relationships of adolescents from unbroken, broken, and reconstituted families. This information is based on information obtained from 1,230 unbroken families, 126 mother-only families, and 210 stepfamilies. The investigator administered parental and student questionnaires, conducted interviews, and utilized the information in school records. The sample drawn for this study was not a random sample. Also, any inferences concluded from the school records of the adolescent subjects may have been biased due to the subjective nature of school records.

The Duberman (1975) study, reviewed previously in this chapter, found that adolescents experience more difficulty in stepfamily adjustment than do younger children. However, this information was based upon responses from parents and stepparents rather than the stepchildren involved. Also, the absence of a comparison group

consisting of other family systems is a limitation to the study.

Clearly, the information obtained from research dealing with adolescent stepchildren is limited. This is due, in part, to the lack of empirical evidence obtained from large, random samples of adolescents. Much of the information obtained concerning adolescent stepchildren is based upon reports from parents, stepparents, and others who know the adolescents. This use of subjective information limits the professional's ability to generalize the results of these research studies to other populations.

Articles and Books Pertaining to Stepfamilies

There is an increasing number of books and articles that explore the stepfamily from a personal point of view, as well as through interviews with stepfamily members. Visher and Visher (1979) have written about the stepfamily from their own personal experiences and the experiences of other stepfamily members. They have stressed the difficulties that adolescent stepchildren may experience, and they have provided stepfamily members with coping strategies for these unique problems. This information is an important contribution to both stepfamily members and helping professionals. However, this information can only be utilized as a guide, due to its subjective nature.

Rosenbaum and Rosenbaum (1977) have written a guide for stepparents based on their personal experiences as stepparents. Roosevelt and Lofas (1977) have designed a remarriage manual for parents and children.

Lutz, Jacobs, and Masson (1981) suggest that with the changing family structure in our society, professionals need to be informed of these changes and their implications. They further cite: (1) discipline; (2) divided loyalty; (3) biological parent elsewhere; and (4) unrealistic expectations, as stepfamily issues which may cause stress in stepfamily living.

The stepfamily literature which is prescriptive rather than descriptive generally suggests major areas which are potentially stressful in stepfamily living. These sources are valuable when used as a basis for further empirical studies. However, this literature may only be considered suggestive, rather than conclusive.

Twelve Categories of Stepfamily Living

The current stepfamily literature suggests that there are 12 areas of stepfamily living which may be stressful for adolescent stepchildren: (1) living with one parent before the remarriage; (2) discipline; (3) social issues; (4) pseudomutuality; (5) divided loyalty; (6) biological parent elsewhere; (7) member of two households; (8) desire for natural parents to reunite; (9) unrealistic expectations; (10) compounded loss; (11) family constellation; and (12) parent's and stepparent's understanding of the stepchild's feelings about the stepfamily. This section of the chapter will review the literature pertaining specifically to each of these 12 areas.

Living with one parent before the remarriage. Statistics indicate that most people remarry two to three years after divorce

or the death of a spouse (Rosenbaum & Rosenbaum, 1977). Life for children during this interim period may be very important in relationship to their adjustment to the stepfamily formation.

Capaldi and McRae (1979) state, "after the initial shock of divorce, interim period and single parenthood, and before the parent is involved with the future mate, family members become closer to one another. During this time, the family customs are stabilized; members know what to expect from one another and can predict the consequences of their actions" (p. 42). Experts until now have agreed that the greater the time spent in the single parent family, the greater the difficulty in the stepchild's adjustment to the stepfamily. Failure to dissolve the single-parent family after remarriage may hinder the establishment of a cooperative stepfamily. Most stepchildren have had their natural parent to themselves for a year or two, and this may make assimilation into the stepfamily more difficult for the new stepparent. The empirical data in this area are limited.

Discipline. Discipline is an area of concern in the nuclear family as well as the stepfamily; however, in the stepfamily problems concerning discipline may be more intensified. Duberman (1975) found that among the 88 couples that shared their feelings about their stepfamily life through interviews and questionnaires, child rearing was found to be their major problem in stepfamily living. Maddox (1975) refers to the "testing" experiences stepparents must experience from the stepchild before acceptance of the stepparent as an authority figure becomes a reality. Bowerman and Irish (1962)

found that the stepchildren felt a greater insecurity in their position in the family than do children in nuclear families. They also found that stepparents were believed to inflict harsher discipline upon stepchildren than other siblings. This belief about stepparent discipline may also cause new stepparents to be reluctant in the role of disciplinarian for fear of being labeled unfair. Adolescents may not easily adjust to stepparents' discipline due to their need to break away from dependency on their family.

Social issues. "Stepfamilies suffer from the weight of societal expectations" (Espinoza & Newman, 1979, p. 41). Visher and Visher (1979) contend that, "the consciousness of society needs to be sharpened in the area of stepfamily life" (p. 9). The stepfamily, in our current society, has not yet become a totally acceptable form of family life. Because of this lack of acceptance, an adolescent may suffer more than any other stepfamily member as a result of their greater need for peer approval.

Pseudomutuality. Pseudomutuality is defined as, "the denial of hostile feelings and their expression between members of the family system" (Goldstein, 1974, p. 435). Stepchildren do know that marriage is not necessarily forever. Often stepchildren feel that they are the cause of the dissolution of the first marriage (Maddox, 1975). The fear of conflict or even the break up of the new marriage may result in the stepchild's over reaction to parent/stepparent disagreements or even a denial of real feelings. This denial of feelings by the stepchild hinders resolution of conflicts and may

cause tension within the stepfamily (Goldstein, 1974).

Divided loyalty. Rosenbaum and Rosenbaum (1977) believe, "if children begin to feel love for a stepparent, they may often feel disloyal to the natural parent" (p. 104). This may be especially true for adolescents who have a longer history with their absentee natural parent or deceased parent. Stepchildren often feel in an either/or situation in which they are caught in the middle (Capaldi & McRae, 1979). This fear of disloyalty to the absentee parent is a potential cause of stress between stepparent and stepchild.

Biological parent elsewhere. In many stepfamily portraits there is a natural parent living away from the stepchild. Stepchildren often tend to idealize the absentee parent (Roosevelt & Lofas, 1977). This may be especially true if the child has contact with the absentee parent infrequently. Other absentee parent issues that have potential to cause stress for stepchildren are: (1) deciding where to spend the holidays and special occasions; (2) finances; and (3) anger and resentment between the two natural parents. This issue may be especially stressful for adolescent stepchildren due to their longer family history with the absentee parent. When an absentee parent does exist in the stepfamily portrait, there is always someone outside the household that does have impact upon the stepfamily members.

Member of two households. "At least 60% of the children of divorced persons retain relationships with the parent outside of their current remarriage household" (Messinger, 1976, p. 195).

Visher and Visher (1979) report that stepchildren often have membership both in their stepfamily household and their absentee parent's household. This dual membership can often be confusing and stressful for stepchildren due to inconsistencies in discipline, finances, and values. This dual membership may be used as a power position for the stepchild, especially in the relationship with the stepparent.

Desire for natural parents to reunite. Often stepchildren hold on to the desire for their natural parents to reunite even after the formation of the stepfamily. Often parents do not discuss their divorce with their children, thus causing the children's fantasies about their parents' reuniting to grow strong. Lutz (1980) states, "this can be a stressful issue in the stepfamily if this desire manifests itself in an uncooperative and/or devious form of behavior on the part of stepchildren" (p. 18).

Unrealistic expectations. "Problems may occur when members of the stepfamily enter the new venture with unrealistic expectations" (Capaldi & McRae, 1979, p. 43). Parents' and children's expectations may vary. They may enter the stepfamily with an unrealistic view of the blending process by only focusing on the positive aspects of the merger, thus suffering a rude awakening. They may also enter the new family with an unrealistically negative view of their new family life, thus removing any room for positive growth. Visher and Visher (1979) suggest that some common unrealistic expectations are: (1) attempting to make up for the failure of the first marriage; (2) attempting to keep all family members happy; and (3) attempting to create instant love. All of these unrealistic expectations can be

stressful for adolescent stepchildren.

Compounded loss. Roosevelt and Lofas (1977) state, "a child's world is his family. When that breaks, his sense of self and security are shattered" (p. 101). Stepchildren may experience a feeling of loss of their natural parent at the time of remarriage. This loss may be compounded with the previous loss of the other biological parent due to death or divorce. This compounded loss may be especially stressful for the adolescent stepchild because of the length of time spent with both natural parents.

Family constellation. Duberman (1973) contends that professionals have ignored the relationships of stepsiblings and half siblings. In the nuclear family each child identifies with his position in the family according to birth order. When the stepfamily is formed, that birth order may not remain constant. As a result of stepsiblings and half siblings, "this competition and change in family position can be particularly stressful for adolescents who have lived longer with their particular position in the family and thus could be less flexible about any change" (Lutz, 1980, pp. 20-21).

Parent's and stepparent's understanding of the stepchild's feelings about stepfamily. Roosevelt and Lofas (1977) feel that it is important for the stepchild to feel a part of the family. Feeling a lack of communication and importance in the family may invoke a stressful situation for the stepchild. Ideally, the stepchild is able to have input into the family decisions, express feelings, and experience feedback from parent and stepparent as an integral link

in the family system. Rosenbaum and Rosenbaum (1977) state that, "getting adolescents to reveal their feelings is not an easy task" (p. 106). Therefore, a lack of communication and understanding may be particularly prevalent and stressful for adolescent stepchildren. Capaldi and McRae (1979) suggest that only through a clear understanding of adolescence can stepparents arrive at solutions and coping behaviors that will help the adolescent feel a part of the blending process.

Demographic Issues

The stepfamily literature cites six demographic factors that may be related to stress for adolescent stepchildren. They are: (1) age of the stepchild at the time of remarriage; (2) number of years spent in the stepfamily; (3) dissolution of the nuclear family; (4) stepmother vs. stepfather families; (5) stepsiblings; and (6) half siblings.

Age of the stepchild at the time of remarriage. Maddox (1975) states, "all agree that adolescence is probably the worst time for a child to become a stepchild" (p. 64). Capaldi and McRae (1979) discuss the natural biological and emotional stages that adolescents experience that may be compounded by the stepfamily experience. The consensus of the stepfamily literature is that the stepfamily experience may be especially stressful for adolescents.

Number of years spent in the stepfamily. In the nuclear family relationships and roles become established over time. The stepfamily is not afforded the luxury of time. All members immediately find themselves involved in new relationships, not

always by choice. Schulman (1972) states:

Under the best circumstances the actual life-together experience will evoke feelings that will have to be worked out later. The new family has to assume new tasks that the natural family does not have to undertake. There is not time for marital adjustment before the children come. At least three, and often more, individuals have to make a rather abrupt operational adjustment to each other (p. 128).

Visher and Visher (1979) suggest that the first three to four years are potentially the most stressful for stepfamily members.

Lutz (1980) suggests that the first two years of stepfamily life are more stressful than later years after stepfamily members have adjusted to the stepfamily.

Dissolution of the nuclear family. Maddox (1975) states, "everybody seems to believe that the way the previous marriage ended must be the single most important determinant in the stepparent-stepchild relations" (p. 69).

Evidence in the literature concerning stress as it relates to death of a parent vs. divorce is not conclusive. Duberman (1973) states that "widowhood seems more likely to lead to excellent relations with stepchildren than being divorced" (p. 289) Bowerman and Irish (1962) found that children of divorced parents adjust better to their stepparent.

In either situation the literature does indicate that the manner in which the nuclear family dissolved is an important factor to consider in the adjustment of stepchildren to the stepfamily.

Stepmother vs. stepfather families. Duberman (1975) found that stepmothers are less likely than stepfathers to have a good relationship with stepchildren. Bowerman and Irish (1962) indicate that

stepmothers were more likely to be seen as discriminating against the children than stepfathers. Espinoza and Newman (1979) state, "there is no question that the stepmother suffers from a worse reputation than the stepfather" (p. 18). It seems that stepmother families have more potential to experience stress than do stepfather families.

Stepsiblings. The empirical literature concerning stepsiblings is scant. Duberman (1973) indicates that stepsiblings can have a positive effect upon each other by providing companionship, emotional security, and love. Visher and Visher (1979) conclude from their research that stepsibling relations serve an important function in the stepfamily and tend to be relatively good relationships. Therefore, it seems that adolescents living in a stepfamily with stepsiblings may experience more harmony than stress. More research is needed in this area.

Half siblings. The effects of half siblings upon the stepfamily are not yet conclusive. Duberman (1975) reports from her study that half siblings do improve the stepfamily relationships. Maddox (1975) feels that half siblings can positively influence stepchildren by signifying the permanence of the new marriage, but that more research in this area is needed in order to predict the influence of half sibling upon stepfamily members.

Summary

There exists some literature written about stepfamilies from personal experience and inference. However, the empirical evidence concerning the stress that adolescents experience

upon entrance to the stepfamily is so limited that definite conclusions and generalizations to other populations cannot be made. More research is needed with large random samples of adolescent stepchildren over longer periods of time. The available literature does indicate that adolescence is the most difficult time to enter the stepfamily life.

Twelve potentially stressful situations for adolescents in stepfamily life are cited in the literature. They are: (1) time spent with one parent before the remarriage; (2) discipline; (3) social issues; (4) pseudomutuality; (5) divided loyalty; (6) biological parent elsewhere; (7) member of two households; (8) desire for natural parents to reunite; (9) unrealistic expectations; (10) compounded loss; (11) family constellation; and (12) parent's and stepparent's understanding of the stepchild's feelings about the stepfamily.

The literature also cites six demographic factors that may be related to the stress that the adolescent stepchild may or may not experience in a stepfamily life. They are: (1) age of the stepchild at the time of remarriage; (2) number of years spent in the stepfamily; (3) dissolution of the nuclear family; (4) stepmother vs. stepfather families; (5) stepsiblings; and (6) half siblings.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Subjects

The subjects in this study were male and female high school students between the ages of 13 and 18 who had entered their step-family during adolescence. The subjects were enrolled in high schools in Berkeley and Marion Counties in West Virginia. Permission was granted to conduct the study in the counties by the Superintendents or Boards of Education via the County Guidance Director.

The subjects' participation was voluntary. Each subject returned to the primary investigator a signed student and parental consent form (see Appendix A). Sixty-three subjects participated in the study. Of these subjects, 28 were male and 35 female. The subjects ranged in age from 13 to 18.

Other Personnel

Professionals assisting the primary investigator with the study were school counselors and homeroom teachers. School counselors served as coordinators in the individual schools with the distribution of consent forms and questionnaires to the homeroom teachers for distribution to the subjects.

The homeroom teachers were responsible for distribution and collection of the consent forms and administration of the questionnaire. An introductory letter was given to the counselors and teachers (see Appendix B).

Procedures

Names of students living in stepfamilies and their respective homeroom teachers were procured through student cumulative folders from the guidance offices or through identification of stepchildren through their homeroom. The potential subjects must have been adolescents who entered their stepfamily between the ages of 12 and 19. The potential subjects were identified, and the 63 subjects returned a signed consent form.

The questionnaires were administered to the subjects during the period from February 16, 1981 to March 20, 1981. The questionnaires were distributed and completed during one homeroom period. Questionnaires were completed in approximately 15 minutes. Sixty-three questionnaires were completed.

Questionnaire Packet

The questionnaire adopted for use in this study was an adaptation of a questionnaire designed and implemented by Lutz (1980) in her study of what is stressful and non-stressful for adolescent stepchildren. The original questionnaire was submitted to the Graduate School of West Virginia University and copyrighted in May, 1980. Permission for use of the questionnaire was granted by the author (see Appendix C).

Included with the questionnaire were (1) a cover letter; (2) a demographic data form; and (3) directions for completing the questionnaire.

Cover Letter

The cover letter (see Appendix D) was the introduction to the packet given to the students. The cover letter (1) introduced the primary investigator; (2) described the purpose of the study; (3) explained confidentiality; (4) explained that each subject was free to refrain from answering any question they chose to omit; (5) explained that each subject could withdraw from the study at any time; (6) explained where the subjects could obtain the results of the study; and (7) thanked each subject for participating in the study.

Demographic Data Form

The demographic data form (see Appendix E) contained seven fill-in-the-blank questions asking: (1) present age; (2) birth date; (3) sex; (4) age at which subject became a member of a stepfamily; (5) number of years subject had lived in a stepfamily; (6) number of years subject has lived with one parent prior to the remarriage; and (7) whether the subject's first family ended in divorce or death of a parent. The demographic data sheet contained 10 questions concerning family members living full time in the subject's home. The subjects were asked to indicate if the following were members of their present households: (1) mother; (2) stepmother; (3) father; (4) stepfather; (5) brother(s); (6) stepbrother(s); (7) sister(s); (8) stepsister(s); (9) half brother(s); (10); half sister(s).

Directions for Completing the Questionnaire

Immediately preceding the actual completion of the questionnaire, the subjects were asked to read one page of directions (see

Appendix F) which included: (1) assurance that there are no right or wrong answers; (2) examples that indicated how to circle the answer (for Sections I and II) that most clearly matches the feelings and experiences of the subject; (3) an explanation of Section II of the questionnaire in which the subjects were asked to respond only to those statements which pertained to them; (4) an explanation of Section III of the questionnaire which contained three open-ended questions; and (5) a restatement of appreciation for the subjects' participation.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire (see Appendix G) used in this study was adapted from the questionnaire designed by Lutz (1980) and was used with the author's permission. The questionnaire was designed to assess 12 categories indicated as areas of stress in the current literature related to stepfamily life. The 12 categories included in the questionnaire were: (1) biological parent elsewhere; (2) compounded loss; (3) desire for natural parents to reunite; (4) discipline; (5) divided loyalty; (6) family constellation; (7) living with one parent before remarriage; (8) member of two households; (9) pseudomutuality; (10) social attitudes; (11) parent's and stepparent's understanding of the stepchild's feelings about the stepfamily; and (12) unrealistic expectations. Three items were written for each of the 12 categories. Five filler items were also included in the questionnaire. Forty-one statements were included in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into three sections: Section I contained 24 items which related to all

stepchildren and Section II contained 17 items which may have related to the subject's stepfamily life. For example, there were items related to stepbrothers and stepsisters and a natural parent living elsewhere. The subjects were asked to respond only to those questions which related to their stepfamily life. Section III contained three open-ended questions. In Section III all subjects were asked to answer question number one; questions two and three were optional.

All 41 items included in Sections I and II were randomly assigned numbers for inclusion in the questionnaire.

Content validity for the questionnaire items was established by two persons from the counseling profession who were knowledgeable about stepfamily literature. One category (sexual issues) included in the Lutz (1980) questionnaire was deleted from the questionnaire used in this study. This was done due to the low Perceived Level of Stress (PLS = .28) for sexual issues obtained in the Lutz study, and due to the nature of the category and its effect upon students and parents.

Two categories were added to the questionnaire. They were: (1) living with one parent before the remarriage; and (2) parent's and stepparent's understanding of the stepchild's feelings about the stepfamily. A review of the literature indicated that these two categories were potential stress areas along with the 10 categories adopted from the Lutz (1980) questionnaire.

Dependent Variables

Two types of variables were measured in this study in relation to what adolescent stepchildren who entered their stepfamily between the ages of 12 and 18 reported as very stressful, somewhat stressful, slightly stressful, or not stressful. They are (1) the 12 categories of stress; and (2) the demographic data.

Categories of stress. The stepfamily literature to date suggests that there are 12 potentially stressful areas of stepfamily living for adolescents. They are: (1) biological parent elsewhere, a situation in which one of the natural parents lives outside the child's household; (2) compounded loss, the loss felt by children when important relationships in their lives change as a result of the remarriage; (3) desire for natural parents to reunite, a desire that children may want to see their natural parents together the way they used to be; (4) discipline, experiencing and adjusting to the new stepfamily rules; (5) divided loyalty, feeling disloyal to the natural parent if one feels positively toward the stepparent; (6) family constellation, the child's position in the family (birth order may change as a result of stepsiblings and/or half siblings); (7) living with one parent before the remarriage, time spent with a single parent may result in a strong emotional bond between parent and child, which may be threatened by the remarriage; (8) member of two households, the child may be considered to be a member of two different households; (9) pseudomutuality, the denial of negative feelings due to the fear that the stepfamily will end as the origi-

nal nuclear family did; (10) social attitudes, a concern with the opinions of others in terms of stepfamily life; (11) stepchild's perceptions of their parent and stepparent's understanding the feelings the child has concerning the natural parent and stepparent's understanding of the adjustments that the child has made in terms of the new stepfamily life; and (12) unrealistic expectations, unreasonable expectations placed on the child by the parent and/or stepparent, or on the parent and/or stepparent by the child.

Demographic data. The current stepfamily literature suggests that demographic factors may play a role in the adolescent's adjustment to stepfamily living. The demographic data investigated in this study were: (1) present age of the adolescent; (2) the sex of the adolescent; (3) the age at which the adolescent became a member of a stepfamily; (4) the number of years the adolescent has lived in a stepfamily; (5) the number of years the adolescent lived with one parent prior to the remarriage; (6) whether the adolescent's nuclear family ended in divorce or death of a natural parent; (7) presence of stepsiblings; (8) the presence of half siblings; and (9) the presence of a stepmother or stepfather.

Data Analysis

Questionnaire reliability. Fifteen subjects completed the questionnaire twice with a two-week interval between the first and second administration of the instrument. The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was used to correlate the mean stress scores of the 15 subjects from the first administration of the questionnaire with the

mean stress scores obtained from the second administration of the questionnaire.

Individual questions. The subjects were asked to answer the questions by circling a number which represented their feelings concerning the stepfamily situation depicted in the question. Each subject's possible responses to answering each question were: (1) 1, not stressful; (2) 2, slightly stressful; (3) 3, somewhat stressful; and (4) 4, very stressful. The halfway point on this scale is 2.5 since zero was not a choice on the response scale. The subjects' answers for each particular question were totaled. This total was divided by the number of subjects that responded to the question; thus obtaining a mean stress score for each question. The questions were ranked from high to low according to their mean stress scores.

Categories of stress. Each of the 12 categories, that represented potential areas of stress in stepfamily living for adolescents, was represented on the questionnaire by three questions. The mean stress scores for each of the three questions were totaled and divided by three, thus obtaining a mean stress score for each of the 12 categories. The categories were ranked from high to low according to their mean stress scores. A mean stress score was also obtained for each subject.

Demographic data. A frequency count was tabulated for each of the responses to the demographic data. One frequency count showed: (1) the present age of the subjects; (2) the number of male and female subjects; (3) the age at which the subjects became stepfamily members; (4) the number of years that each subject had lived in a stepfamily; (5) the number of years that each subject lived with

one parent prior to the remarriage; (6) the number of stepfamilies formed after death of a natural parent and the number of stepfamilies formed after the divorce of the stepchild's natural parents; (7) the number of stepfamilies with stepsiblings present and the number of stepfamilies with stepsiblings not present; (8) the number of stepfamilies with half siblings present and the number of stepsiblings with half siblings not present; and (9) the number of subjects who live with a stepmother and the number of subjects who live with a stepfather.

Filler items. Responses to the five filler items were tabulated. A mean stress score for each filler item was obtained. A mean stress score for the five filler items grouped together was also computed.

Open-ended questions. The first open-ended question asked, "from your experiences, what statement on the questionnaire is the most stressful situation in stepfamily life for you?" A frequency count was made of the questions which the subjects indicated by their answer to this open-ended question.

The second open-ended question asked, "what other situations in stepfamily living not mentioned in this questionnaire do you find stressful?" A list was made of the subjects' responses to this question.

The third open-ended question asked for other comments. A list was made of the subjects' responses to this open-ended question.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The results of this study are presented in six sections. The first section reports the results of the demographic data reported by the subjects. Section two reports the data pertaining to the reliability of the questionnaire. Section three reports the data obtained from the questionnaire in three sub-sections: (1) rank order of 12 categories of stress by mean stress scores; (2) reporting of mean stress scores of individual questions within each of the 12 categories of stress; and (3) rank order of individual questions by mean stress scores. The fourth section reports the mean stress for the five filler items included in the questionnaire. Section five includes the data obtained from the three open-ended questions included in the questionnaire. Included in the sixth section is the information pertaining to the relationship of the demographic variables to the mean stress scores. The results are based upon the responses of 63 subjects.

Demographic Data

A frequency count was made on all the demographic data. The mean age of the 63 subjects was 15.8 with the ages ranging from 13 to 18. There were 28 males and 35 females participating in the study. The average length of time spent in the stepfamily for the subjects was 2.76 years. The mean age at which the subjects became a member of their stepfamily was 13.09. The average number of years

spent living with one parent before the remarriage was 4.30. Eighteen of the subjects lived in a stepmother family, and 40 subjects lived with stepfathers. Five subjects chose not to report this data. Seventeen of the subjects lived with stepsiblings, and 13 subjects lived with half siblings. Five subjects lived with both stepsiblings and half siblings, and 33 subjects reported no step-sibling or half siblings present in their family. Fifty-five of the subjects lived in stepfamilies formed after their natural parents had divorced, and eight subjects lived in stepfamilies formed after the death of a natural parent. The frequency counts of the demographic data are presented in Appendix H.

Questionnaire Reliability

The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was used to obtain the test-retest reliability coefficient for the questionnaire used in this study. Fifteen subjects completed the questionnaire twice with a two-week interval between test and retest. A correlation of .89 was obtained which was significant at $p < .05$. Therefore, a significant relationship existed between the test and the retest scores.

Questionnaire Data

Rank order of the categories of stress. Table 1 presents a rank order of the 12 categories of stress by mean stress scores. The highest mean stress score was reported for the category of Discipline at 2.52. This was the only category with a mean stress score above 2.50.

Table 1
 Rank Order of the Categories of Stress
 by Mean Stress Scores

Category of Stress	Mean Stress Score
Discipline	2.52
Biological Parent Elsewhere	2.28
Compounded Loss	2.27
Parent's and Stepparent's Understanding of the Stepchild's Feelings about the Stepfamily	2.26
Pseudomutuality	2.22
Living with One Parent Before the Remarriage	2.20
Unrealistic Expectations	2.19
Divided Loyalty	2.16
Family Constellation	2.10
Desire for Natural Parents to Reunite	2.08
Member of Two Households	2.01
Social Issues	1.50

Five categories yielded a mean stress score between 2.28 and 2.20. The mean stress score for Biological Parent Elsewhere was 2.28. The mean stress score for the category of Compounded Loss was 2.27. A mean stress score of 2.26 was reported for the category of Parent's and Stepparent's Understanding of the Stepchild's Feelings About the Stepfamily. The category of Pseudomutuality yielded a mean stress score of 2.22. Living with One Parent Before the Remarriage yielded a mean stress score of 2.20.

Five categories yielded a mean stress score between 2.19 and 2.01: Unrealistic Expectations (2.19), Divided Loyalty (2.16), Family Constellation (2.10), Desire for Natural Parents to Reunite (2.08), and Member of Two Households (2.01). The category of Social Issues was reported as least stressful by the subjects with a mean stress score of 1.50.

It can be concluded that the subjects found the category of Discipline as most stressful. The next 11 categories were seen as slightly stressful for the respondents. The least stressful category was the category dealing with Social Issues.

Mean stress scores for individual questions within categories.

Table 2 presents the mean stress scores for each of the three questions within the 12 categories of stress. The category of Discipline yielded the highest mean stress score of 2.52. A mean stress score of 2.67 was computed for the question "Accepting discipline from a stepparent," and a mean stress score of 2.56 was computed for the question "Adjusting to living with a new set of rules from your

Table 2

Mean Stress Scores of Individual Questions Within Categories

Category of Stress	Question	Mean Stress Score
Discipline Mean Stress Score=2.52	17. Accepting discipline from a stepparent.	2.67
	5. Adjusting to living with a new set of rules from your stepparent.	2.56
	11. Dealing with the differences between what is expected of you by your natural parent and your stepparent.	2.34
Biological Parent Elsewhere Mean Stress Score=2.28	41. Not being able to visit a parent who does not live with you.	2.35
	32. Spending holidays and special occasions away from one of your natural parents.	2.34
	28. Feeling excluded from the parent you do not live with.	2.16
Compounded Loss Mean Stress Score=2.27	19. Feeling that your relationship with your natural parent has been changed.	2.47
	13. Sharing your natural parent with your stepparent.	2.20
	21. Feeling less important now than when you did not live in a stepfamily.	2.13

Table 2 (cont'd.)

Category of Stress	Question	Mean Stress Score
Parent's and Stepparent's Understanding of the Stepchild's Feelings about the Stepfamily Mean Stress Score=2.26	24. Feeling that your natural parent and/or stepparent do not understand the changes you have faced as a result of the stepfamily.	2.72
	18. Feeling that your views on helping to "make the stepfamily work" are sometimes not important to your natural parent and/or stepparent.	2.14
	22. Feeling that your efforts to improve the stepfamily are sometimes overlooked by your natural parent and/or stepparent.	1.91
Pseudomutuality Mean Stress Score=2.22	15. Hearing your parent and stepparent disagreeing or arguing.	2.49
	2. Feeling pressure to "make this family work."	2.13
Living with One Parent Before the Remarriage Mean Stress Score=2.20	20. Feeling that the parent and stepparent that you live with will "split up."	2.12
	3. Adjusting to having a stepparent after living with one parent for some time.	2.49
	10. Wanting to live only with your natural parent that you had been living with before the remarriage.	2.18
	23. Feeling that your natural parent needs less support from you that he/she did during the period of time between the divorce/death and the remarriage.	1.94

Table 2 (cont'd.)

Category of Stress	Question	Mean Stress Score
Unrealistic Expectations Mean Stress Score=2.19	4. Being expected to call a stepparent "Mom" or "Dad."	2.85
	9. Feeling pressured to spend time with your family.	1.88
	8. Being expected to like or love a stepparent.	1.85
Divided Loyalty Mean Stress Score=2.16	33. Hearing one natural parent talking negatively about the other natural parent.	2.68
	30. Feeling "caught in the middle" between your two natural parents.	2.29
	29. Liking a stepparent more than your natural parent that you do not live with.	1.52
Family Constellation Mean Stress Score=2.10	26. Adjusting to having a new stepbrother(s) or step-sister(s).	2.45
	40. Adjusting to having a half brother(s) or half sister(s) (the natural child of your natural parent and stepparent).	
	38. Adjusting to a new position in the family (for example, if you were the oldest child in your natural family and now you have an older step-brother or stepsister).	1.87

Table 2 (cont'd.)

Category of Stress	Question	Mean Stress Score
Desire for Natural Parents to Reunite Mean Stress Score=2.08	39. Wanting your natural parents to get back together.	2.30
	25. Longing for your family to be the way it used to when your natural parents were together.	2.01
	31. Wanting your parent and stepparent to break up.	1.93
	34. Deciding in which household to spend holidays and special occasions.	2.15
Members of Two Households Mean Stress Score=2.01	35. Adjusting to another set of rules when you are visiting the parent you do not live with.	1.97
	36. Adjusting to the rules at home after you have been visiting the parent you do not live with.	1.90
Social Issues Mean Stress Score=1.50	14. Having to explain why your name is different from others in your family.	
	1. Having to tell your teachers and friends at school that you have a stepparent.	1.56
	6. Feeling different from your friends because you have a stepparent.	1.23

stepparent." The question "Dealing with the differences between what is expected of you by your natural parent and your stepparent" yielded a mean stress score of 2.34.

The category of stress dealing with Biological Parent Elsewhere yielded a mean stress score of 2.28. The question dealing with "Not being able to visit a parent who does not live with you" yielded a mean stress score of 2.35, while the question "Spending holidays and special occasions away from one of your natural parents" yielded a mean stress score of 2.34. A mean stress score of 2.16 was computed for the question "Feeling excluded from the parent you do not live with."

As depicted in Table 2, the mean stress score for the category of Compounded Loss was 2.27. The question "Feeling that your relationship with your natural parent has been changed because you now have a stepparent" yielded a mean stress score of 2.47. A mean stress score of 2.20 was computed for the question "Sharing your natural parent with your stepparent," and the question "Feeling less important now than when you did not live in a stepparent family" yielded a mean stress score of 2.13.

Table 2 shows the fourth category, Parent's and Stepparent's understanding of the stepchild's feelings about the stepfamily, yielded a mean stress score of 2.26. The question "Feeling that your natural parent and/or stepparent do not understand the changes you have faced as a result of the stepfamily" yielded a mean stress score of 2.72. A mean stress score of 2.14 was obtained for the

question "Feeling that your views on helping to make the stepfamily work are sometimes not important to your natural parent and/or step-parent," and the question "Feeling that your efforts to improve the stepfamily are sometimes overlooked by your natural parent and/or stepparent" yielded a mean stress score of 1.91.

The category of Pseudomutuality yielded a mean stress score of 2.22. The question "Hearing your parent and stepparent disagreeing or arguing" yielded a mean stress score of 2.40. A mean stress score of 2.13 was computed for the question "Feeling pressure to make this family work," and a mean stress score of 2.12 was obtained for the question "Feeling that the parent and stepparent that you live with will split up."

As reported in Table 2, the category, Living with One Parent Before the Remarriage, yielded a mean stress score of 2.20. A mean stress score of 2.49 was computed for the question "Adjusting to having a stepparent after living with one parent for some time," and the question "Wanting to live only with your natural parent that you had been living with before the remarriage" had a mean stress score of 2.18. The question "Feeling that your natural parent needs less support from you than he/she did during the period of time between the divorce/death and the remarriage" had a mean stress score of 1.94.

As indicated in Table 2, Unrealistic Expectations yielded a mean stress score of 2.19. A mean stress score of 2.85 was obtained for the question "Being expected to call a stepparent Mom or Dad." The question "Feeling pressured to spend time with your family" had

a mean stress score of 1.88, and the question "Being expected to live or love a stepparent" had a mean stress score of 1.85.

The category of Divided Loyalty had a mean stress score of 2.16. A mean stress score of 2.68 was found for the question "Hearing one natural parent talking negatively about the other natural parent," and the question "Feeling caught in the middle between your two natural parents" had a mean stress score of 2.29. The question "Liking a stepparent more than your natural parent that you do not live with" yielded a mean stress score of 1.52.

A mean stress score of 2.10 was computed for the category Family Constellation with the question "Adjusting to having a new stepbrother(s) or stepsister(s)" yielded a mean stress score of 2.45 . The question "Adjusting to having a half brother(s) or half sister(s) (the natural child of your natural parent and stepparent)" had a mean stress score of 1.98, and a mean stress score of 1.87 was computed for the question "Adjusting to a new position in the family."

One category, Desire for Natural Parents to Reunite was computed to have a mean stress score of 2.08. A mean stress score of "Wanting your natural parents to get back together" yielded a mean stress score of 2.30, and the question "Longing for your family to be the way it used to be when your natural parents were together" yielded a mean stress score of 2.01. A mean stress score of 1.93 was computed for the question "Wanting your parent and stepparent to break up."

Table 2 indicates that the mean stress score for the category

Member of Two Households was 2.01. The question "Deciding in which household to spend holidays and special occasions" had a mean stress score of 2.15. The question "Adjusting to another set of rules when you are visiting the parent you do not live with" had a mean stress score of 1.97, and the question "Adjusting to the rules at home after you have been visiting the parent you do not live with" had a mean stress score of 1.90.

The last category of stress, Social Issues, yielded a mean stress score of 1.50. The question "Having to explain why your name is different from others in your family" had a mean stress score of 1.72. A mean stress score of 1.56 was obtained for the question "Having to tell your teacher and friends at school that you have a stepparent," and the question "Feeling different from your friends because you have a stepparent" had a mean stress score of 1.23.

The mean stress scores for the questions ranged from 2.85 to 1.23. The mean range of the mean stress scores of the individual questions within categories was 1.67.

Rank order of individual questions by mean stress scores. Table 3 presents the rank order of the individual questions by their mean stress scores. Five of the questions had a mean stress score of above 2.50. These questions were: (1) "Being expected to call a stepparent Mom or Dad" (mean stress score = 2.85); (2) "Feeling that your natural parent and/or stepparent do not understand the changes you have faced as a result of the stepfamily" (mean stress score = 2.72); (3) "Hearing one natural parent talking negatively about the

Table 3

Rank Order of Individual Questions by Mean Stress Scores

Question	Mean Stress Score
4. Being expected to call a stepparent "Mom" or "Dad."	2.85
24. Feeling that your natural parent and/or stepparent do not understand the changes you have faced as a result of the stepfamily.	2.72
33. Hearing one natural parent talking negatively about the other natural parent.	2.68
17. Accepting discipline from a stepparent.	2.67
5. Adjusting to living with a new set of rules from your stepparent.	2.56
3. Adjusting to living with a stepparent after living with one parent for some time.	2.49
19. Feeling that your relationship with your natural parent has been changed because you now have a stepparent.	2.47
26. Adjusting to having a new stepbrother(s) or stepsister(s).	2.45
15. Hearing your parent and stepparent disagreeing or arguing.	2.40
41. Not being able to visit a parent who does not live with you.	2.35
11. Dealing with the difference between what is expected of you by your natural parent or your stepparent.	2.34
32. Spending holidays and special occasions away from one of your natural parents.	2.34
39. Wanting your natural parents to get back together.	2.30

Table 3 (cont'd.)

Question	Mean Stress Score
30. Feeling "caught in the middle" between your two natural parents.	2.29
13. Sharing your natural parent with your stepparent.	2.18
10. Wanting to live only with your natural parent that you had been living with before the remarriage.	2.16
28. Feeling excluded from the parent you do not live with.	2.15
34. Deciding in which household to spend holidays and special occasions.	2.14
18. Feeling that your views on helping to "make the stepfamily work" are sometimes not important to your natural parent and/or stepparent.	2.13
2. Feeling pressure to "make this family work."	2.13
21. Feeling less important now than when you did not live in a stepfamily.	2.12
20. Feeling that the parent and stepparent that you live with will "split up."	2.01
25. Longing for your family to "be the way it used to be" when your natural parents were together.	1.98
40. Adjusting to having a half brother(s) or half sister(s) (the natural child of your natural parent and stepparent).	1.97
35. Adjusting to another set of rules when you are visiting the parent you do not live with.	

Table 3 (cont'd.)

Question	Mean Stress Score
23. Feeling that your natural parent needs less support from you than he/she did during the period of time between the divorce/death and the remarriage.	1.94
31. Wanting your parent and stepparent to break up.	1.93
22. Feeling that your efforts to improve the stepfamily are sometimes overlooked by your natural parent and/or stepparent.	1.91
36. Adjusting to the rules at home after you have been visiting the parent you do not live with.	1.90
9. Feeling pressured to spend time with your family.	1.88
38. Adjusting to a new position in the family (for example, if you were the oldest child in your natural family and now you have an older stepbrother or step-sister).	1.87
8. Being expected to like to love a stepparent.	1.85
14. Having to explain why your name is different from others in your family.	1.72
1. Having to tell your teachers and friends at school that you have a stepparent.	1.56
29. Liking a stepparent more than your natural parent that you do not live with.	1.52
6. Feeling different from your friends because you have a stepparent.	1.23

other natural parent" (mean stress score = 2.68); (4) "Accepting discipline from a stepparent" (mean stress score = 2.66); and (5) "Adjusting to living with a new set of rules from your stepparent" (mean stress score = 2.56).

Four of the questions yielded a mean stress score between 2.49 and 2.40. They were: (1) "Adjusting to having a stepparent after living with one parent for some time" (mean stress score = 2.49); (2) "Feeling that your relationship with your natural parent has been changed because you now have a stepparent" (mean stress score = 2.47); (3) "Adjusting to having a new stepbrother(s) or stepsister(s)" (mean stress score = 2.45); and (4) "Hearing your parent and stepparent disagreeing or arguing" (mean stress score = 2.40).

Five questions yielded a mean stress between 2.35 and 2.29. They were: (1) "Not being able to visit a parent who does not live with you" (mean stress score = 2.35); (2) "Dealing with the differences between what is expected of you by your natural parent and your stepparent" (mean stress score = 2.34); (3) "Spending holidays and special occasions away from one of your natural parents" (mean stress score = 2.34); (4) "Wanting your natural parents to get back together" (mean stress score = 2.30); and (5) "Feeling caught in the middle between your two natural parents" (mean stress score = 2.29).

Nine questions yielded a mean stress score between 2.19 and 2.01. They were: (1) "Sharing your natural parent with your stepparent" (mean stress score = 2.19); (2) "Wanting to live only with your natural parent that you had been living with before the remarriage"

(mean stress score = 2.18); (3) "Feeling excluded from the parent you do not live with" (mean stress score = 2.16); (4) "Deciding in which household to spend holidays and special occasions" (mean stress score = 2.15); (5) "Feeling that your views on helping to make the stepfamily work are sometimes not important to your natural parent and/or stepparent" (mean stress score = 2.14); (6) "Feeling pressure to make this family work" (mean stress score = 2.13); (7) "Feeling less important now than when you did not live in a stepfamily" (mean stress score = 2.13); (8) "Feeling that the parent and stepparent that you live with will split up" (mean stress score = 2.12); and (9) "Longing for your family to be the way it used to be when your natural parents were together" (mean stress score = 2.01).

Six questions had a mean stress score between 1.98 and 1.90. They were: (1) "Adjusting to having a half brother(s) or a half sister(s) (the natural child of your natural parent and stepparent)" (mean stress score = 1.98); (2) "Adjusting to another set of rules when you are visiting the parent you do not live with" (mean stress score = 1.97); (3) "Feeling that your natural parent needs less support from you than he/she did during the period of time between the divorce/death and the remarriage" (mean stress score = 1.94); (4) "Wanting your parent and stepparent to break up" (mean stress score = 1.93); (5) "Feeling that your efforts to improve the stepfamily are sometimes overlooked by your natural parent and/or stepparent" (mean stress score = 1.91); and (6) "Adjusting to the rules at home after you have been visiting the parent you do not live with"

(mean stress score = 1.90).

The seven questions yielding the lowest mean stress scores ranged from 1.88 to 1.23. Those questions were: (1) "Feeling pressured to spend time with your family" (mean stress score = 1.88); (2) "Adjusting to a new position in the family" (mean stress score = 1.87); (3) "Being expected to like or love a stepparent" (mean stress score = 1.85); (4) "Having to explain why your name is different from the others in your family" (mean stress score = 1.72); (5) "Having to tell your teachers and friends at school that you have a stepparent" (mean stress score = 1.56); (6) "Liking a stepparent more than your natural parent that you do not live with" (mean stress score = 1.52); and (7) "Feeling different from your friends because you have a stepparent" (mean stress score = 1.23).

Thus, there is a wide range of mean stress scores for the 36 individual questions included in the questionnaire. The range for the mean stress scores for the individual questions was 2.64.

Filler Items

Five filler items were included in the questionnaire in an effort to prevent random and socially desirable responding to questionnaire. The mean stress score for the five filler items was 2.42. The filler items dealt with areas of stress deemed relevant for all adolescents. The mean stress score indicates that the filler items were perceived as more than slightly stressful for the subjects. Question 16 "Feeling that your opinion as a teenager is not taken seriously" yielded a mean stress score of 2.87. This was the highest

mean stress score for all of the 41 questions on the questionnaire. These results indicate that the stress experienced by adolescent stepchildren may, in part, be due to the adolescent experience, and is not totally a result of being a stepchild. A report of the mean stress scores for the filler items can be found in Table 4.

Table 4
Filler Items Ranked by Mean Stress Scores

Filler Item	Mean Stress Score
16. Feeling that your opinion as a teenager is not taken seriously	2.87
27. Feeling like you are not given the trust and responsibility you are able to handle.	2.54
37. Deciding what to do after high school.	2.40
7. Feeling a lack of communication in your family.	2.18
12. Experiencing "not being out on your own" at this time.	2.09

Open-Ended Questions

Three open-ended questions were included in Section III of the questionnaire. They were: (1) "From your experiences, what statement on the questionnaire is the most stressful situation in stepfamily life for you?"; (2) "What other situations in stepfamily living not mentioned in this questionnaire do you find stressful?"; and (3) "Other comments."

Fifty-eight subjects responded to the first open-ended question, "From your experiences, what statement on the questionnaire is the most stressful situation in stepfamily life for you?" Seven of the 58 subjects indicated that question four was the most stressful situation. Question four states, "Being expected to call a step-parent Mom or Dad." Five subjects responded that question 33, "Hearing one natural parent talking negatively about the other natural parent," was most stressful for them. A frequency count of the responses to the first open-ended question can be found in Appendix I.

The second open-ended question asked, "What other situations in stepfamily living not mentioned in this questionnaire do you find stressful?" Thirty-six subjects chose to respond to this second open-ended question. The responses to the second open-ended question can be found in Appendix J. The responses to the third open-ended question, "Other comments," can be found in Appendix K. Twenty-two subjects chose to respond to the third open-ended question.

Relationship of Demographic Variables to the Mean Stress Scores

Time spent in the stepfamily in relationship to the present ages of the subjects. Table 5 reports the results of the mean stress scores of the 63 subjects categorized according to time spent in the stepfamily and their present ages. The results of the Lutz (1980) study indicated that the reported stress was higher for those subjects who had lived in a stepfamily two years or less than was the reported stress for those subjects who had lived in a stepfamily more than two years.

Table 5

Mean Stress Scores of Subjects According to Time Spent in the Stepfamily and Present Age

Time Spent in the Stepfamily (years)	<u>Age</u>					
	13	14	15	16	17	18
0-2	1.92(3)	1.93(2)	1.89(1)	1.96(5)	2.12(2)	
$\bar{X} = 1.96(13)$						
2-3		2.17(8)	2.87(2)	2.47(2)	2.45(4)	
$\bar{X} = 2.49(16)$						
3-4			2.30(7)	2.02(7)	2.19(6)	
$\bar{X} = 2.17(20)$						
4-6				1.76(4)	1.92(7)	2.17(3)
$\bar{X} = 1.95(14)$						

Note: \bar{X} computed from mean stress scores from individual subjects.

This study did not yield similar results. Those subjects who have lived in a stepfamily two to three years yielded the highest mean stress scores. The mean stress score for the 16 subjects who had lived in a stepfamily two to three years was 2.49. This was followed by a mean stress score of 2.17 for the 20 subjects who have lived in a stepfamily three to four years. The 13 subjects who have lived in a stepfamily zero to two years yielded a mean stress score of 1.96. The 14 subjects who have lived in a stepfamily four to six years yielded a mean stress score of 1.95. Thus, for the 63 subjects who participated in this study, those subjects who have lived in a stepfamily two to three years yielded the highest mean stress score.

The mean stress scores for the subjects according to their ages in relationship to time in the stepfamily indicated that the subjects with the highest mean stress score (2.87) were those stepchildren who were 15 years of age and have lived in a stepfamily two to three years.

Due to the small number of subjects in the 13 year to 18 year age groups, the mean stress score for the subjects according to age, regardless of time, were merely reported in Table 5.

Time spent with one parent before the remarriage in relationship to the present ages of the subjects. Table 6 reports the results of the mean stress scores of 61 of the 63 subjects categorized according to the time spent with one parent before the remarriage and their present ages. Lutz (1980) suggested that the longer the time the

Table 6

Mean Stress Scores of Subjects According to Time Spent with One Parent Before the Remarriage and Present Age

Time Spent with One Parent Before the Remarriage (years)	Age					
	13	14	15	16	17	18
0-3	2.42(1)	2.05(6)	2.26(3)	2.14(5)	2.23(7)	2.51(2)
$\bar{X} = 2.27(24)$						
3-5	1.67(2)	2.25(1)	2.27(5)	1.98(4)	2.29(5)	
$\bar{X} = 2.09(17)$						
5-9		2.08(2)	2.81(2)	2.02(3)	2.35(4)	1.50(1)
$\bar{X} = 2.15(12)$						
9 and above		2.36(2)		1.33(4)	1.19(2)	
$\bar{X} = 1.63(8)$						

Note: \bar{X} computed from mean stress scores from individual subjects.

child has spent with a single parent the more stress the child may experience as a result of the stepfamily. However, the results of the Lutz study yielded no significant difference between the Perceived Level of Stress scores for those adolescents who had lived zero to two years with a single parent and those adolescents who had lived two or more years with a single parent.

As indicated in Table 6, the highest mean stress score according to time spent with a single parent was 2.27 for those subjects who had lived with a single parent zero to three years. Those subjects who had lived with a single parent five to nine years yielded a mean stress score of 2.15, while those subjects who had lived with a single parent three to five years yielded a mean stress score of 2.09. The lowest calculated mean stress score was 1.63 for those subjects who had lived with a single parent nine years or more. These results do not concur with much of the current literature which suggests that the longer the time spent with a single parent before the remarriage, the higher the level of stress for the stepchild. These results do lend credence to the results of the Lutz (1980) study in which those subjects who had spent the longest amount of time living with a single parent before the remarriage yielded the lowest mean stress score.

Demographic variables categorized according to mean stress scores. Demographic variables other than time spent in a stepfamily and living with one parent before the remarriage were also categorized according to mean stress scores. They are: (1) stepmother

vs. stepfather families; (2) stepmother/stepdaughter relationships; (3) stepmother/stepson relationships; (4) stepfather/stepdaughter relationships; (5) stepfather/stepson relationships; (6) the presence of stepsiblings; (7) the presence of half siblings; (8) the absence of stepsiblings and half siblings; (9) reason for dissolution of the previous marriage; and (10) sex of the subjects.

The 18 subjects living with a stepmother yielded a mean stress score of 2.18, while those subjects living with a stepfather yielded a mean stress score of 2.04. Stepdaughters living with a stepmother yielded a mean stress score of 1.98, and stepsons living with a stepmother had a mean stress score of 2.17. Stepdaughters living with a stepfather yielded a mean stress score of 2.10, while stepsons living with a stepfather had a mean stress score of 2.09. Thus, very little difference is reported concerning stepmother/stepfather relationships for the 63 subjects.

Subjects living with stepsiblings yielded a mean stress score of 2.20, while subjects living with half siblings had a mean stress score of 2.29. The five subjects living with both stepsiblings and half siblings had a mean stress score of 2.25. Subjects not residing with stepsiblings or half siblings yielded a mean stress score of 2.18.

Subjects that experienced the death of a natural parent before the remarriage had a mean stress score of 2.26, while subjects whose natural parents had divorced had a mean stress score of 2.13.

The 28 male subjects yielded a mean stress score of 2.07, and

the 35 female subjects had a mean stress score of 2.17. It appears that the sex of the 63 subjects had little effect upon their mean stress score. The results of these demographic variables categorized according to their mean stress scores can be found in Appendix L.

Summary of the Results

One category of stress, Discipline, received a mean stress score over 2.50 (mean stress score = 2.52). The category receiving the lowest mean stress score was Social Issues (mean stress score = 1.50). The remaining categories of stress had mean stress scores ranging from 2.28 to 2.01.

Five of the individual questions received a mean stress score over 2.50. They were: (1) "Being expected to call a stepparent Mom or Dad" (mean stress score = 2.85); (2) "Feeling that your natural parent and/or stepparent do not understand the change you have faced as a result of the stepfamily" (mean stress score = 2.72); (3) "Hearing one natural parent talking negatively about the other natural parent" (mean stress score = 2.68); (4) "Accepting discipline from a stepparent" (mean stress score = 2.66); and (5) "Adjusting to living with a new set of rules from your stepparent" (mean stress score = 2.56).

Four of the individual questions received a mean stress score between 1.72 and 1.23. They were: (1) "Having to explain why your name is different from others in your family" (mean stress score = 1.72); (2) "Having to tell your teachers and friends at school that

you have a stepparent" (mean stress score = 1.56); (3) "Liking a stepparent more than your natural parent that you do not live with" (mean stress score = 1.52); and (4) "Feeling different from your friends because you have a stepparent" (mean stress score = 1.23). Three of these four questions receiving the lowest mean stress scores dealt with Social Issues. The remaining individual questions received mean stress scores ranging from 2.49 to 1.85.

Categorizing the mean stress scores of the 63 subjects according to demographic variables indicated that those subjects who had lived in a stepfamily two to three years had the highest mean stress scores (mean stress score = 2.36). Subjects who had lived with a single parent three to five years before the remarriage yielded the highest mean stress score (mean stress score = 3.18).

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The major purpose of this study was to investigate stress experienced by adolescents in stepfamily living. Much of the stepfamily literature suggests that adolescent stepchildren do experience stress in stepfamily living (Capaldi & McRae, 1979; Rosenbaum & Rosenbaum, 1977; Visher & Visher, 1979). A major finding of this study was that the mean stress score for the subjects fell just above the "slightly stressful" point on the four-point response scale.

It may be that much of the stress experienced by adolescent stepchildren is adolescent stress not related to stepfamily living. This is suggested by the responses to two filler items related to adolescence. They were: (1) "Feeling that your opinion as a teenager is not taken seriously" (mean stress score = 2.87); and (2) "Feeling like you are not given the trust and responsibility you are able to handle" (mean stress score = 2.54). If this is true, then there need not be great alarm over the fact that more and more children are growing up in stepfamilies.

This chapter will discuss the findings and implications of this study in the following areas: (1) the high and low categories of stress ranked according to mean stress scores; (2) demographic variables; (3) open-ended questions; (4) implications of the study; and (5) recommendations for future research.

Categories of Stress

This section will discuss the three highest and the three lowest categories of stress ranked according to their mean stress scores.

Discipline. The area of discipline yielded the highest level of stress for the subjects of this study. This is not a new finding, but it does deserve attention since much of the stepfamily literature notes discipline as a potentially stressful area of stepfamily life (Duberman, 1975; Maddox, 1975; Visher & Visher, 1979). The results of this study concerning the area of discipline concur with the results of the Lutz (1980) study in which discipline was found to be significantly stressful for the stepchildren who participated in that study.

Adolescents may have a particularly difficult time dealing with discipline from their parents and stepparents due to their strong need for autonomy. Adolescence is a developmental period in which the child is moving toward adulthood and independence, and yet still dependent upon adults. It is not unusual for teenagers to experience ambivalence and rebellion toward their parents. They are striving for control in their lives, and a change in family structure may threaten this control.

The area of discipline is not only a stepfamily issue. From personal experiences as a school counselor and in talking to other school counselors, it is evident that discipline is a stressful issue for many adolescents, regardless of the type of family in which they live. An informal survey of 45 high school students living in a nuclear family (North Marion High School, West Virginia)

revealed that those adolescents also experienced discipline as the most stressful issue in family living.

Problems with discipline are common in all family forms. Lutz (1980) suggested that "it may be that discipline in stepfamilies is no more stressful than in other family units" (p. 76). Many families have difficult experiences in dealing with the disciplining of adolescents. Adolescence is a time of testing, rebelling, and seeking independence. It may be difficult for an adolescent to accept discipline from anyone, especially someone they have not known for a very long time and who is not their natural parent. Therefore, the stress expressed by the subjects concerning discipline may not be totally the result of living in a stepfamily, but stepfamily living could compound the problem.

Because discipline was seen as the most stressful area of stepfamily living for the subjects, it would be valuable for helping professionals to teach parents and stepparents more effective ways to discipline the adolescent. It would be valuable to investigate the stress levels concerning discipline in other family forms.

Biological parent elsewhere. This category deals with adolescent stepchildren's feelings about their relationship with their absentee parent. Even though the mean stress score for this category was not extremely high, there is some stress experienced by the subjects in terms of their absentee parent. It is interesting to note that the subjects' responses indicate that they experience more stress concerning not being able to visit their absentee parent than feeling excluded from their absentee parent. It may be that these

adolescent stepchildren have established a strong relationship with their absentee parent in which they feel secure. Even though they may not be able to see their absentee parent as often as they would like, they do not seem to feel excluded from them.

This moderate stress response related to exclusion from the absentee parent may be due to the fact that the subjects have a longer history with their absentee parent due to their age. A higher stress response in terms of time spent with the absentee parent could be due to the unwillingness of their natural parents and stepparent to cooperate in a manner which facilitates the stepchild's relationship with the absentee parent. Another variable within this category is one of geography. Often times an absentee parent lives a great distance from the child. This makes it even more difficult for the child and parent to maintain a relationship.

Finally, one possibility that is not sufficiently brought forth in the literature is that the stepchild may prefer the stepfamily unit to visiting the absentee parent. Therefore, deciding where to spend holidays and when to visit the absentee parent may be stressful because the stepchild prefers not to do this. It is not safe for counselors and parents to assume that all stepchildren highly value their relationship with their absentee parent. Much of this depends upon the child's previous relationship with that parent.

In either case, the biological parent elsewhere may remind the stepchild of the feelings of loss and change which are potentially stressful. This may also cause a preoccupation with the idea that relationships do not always survive. Therapists should be aware of

this possibility and help stepchildren to deal positively with relationships, exclusive of their past experiences with their parents' relationship.

Compounded loss. This category deals with the situation in which the stepchild feels a loss of a close parent-child relationship as a result of the remarriage. This category yielded the third highest mean stress score for the subjects. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) suggest that although many of their subjects were eager for their new stepparent's arrival, they also felt an uneasiness concerning their position in the family. This could include a fear concerning possible changes in the relationship with their natural parent. These researchers further report that although a number of their subjects felt a sense of relief from the close relationship with their natural parent, others felt humiliated at being needed less and pushed to the side.

There was some stress reported by the subjects in terms of compounded loss. However, as with the other 11 categories, the stress is not high. It may be that adolescents have a feeling of permanency with their natural parent as a result of the number of years that they have lived with their parent. They may be able to reason that their parent's remarriage does not change the feelings that their parent has for them; only the time given to them by their parent and their family lifestyle may change. Also, adolescent stepchildren may be, as other adolescents, more involved with their life outside the family. If they feel secure in their relationships with their peers, a change in their relationship with their parent may not

be threatening.

Even though there was minimal stress experienced by some subjects as a result of the changes in the stepchild/natural parent relationship, therapists and parents need to be aware that it is important for the stepchild to feel secure in their relationship with their natural parent. School counselors could aid stepfamilies in their adjustment to the blending process if they can educate parents to the importance of maintaining a smooth, consistent relationship with their children.

Desire for natural parents to reunite. Much of the literature suggests that children foster fantasies that their natural parents will get back together (Roosevelt & Lofas, 1977; Visher & Visher, 1979). This category was not seen as very stressful for most of the subjects in this study. This may not be a stressful issue for adolescent stepchildren for various reasons. First of all, it may be that the stepchildren had a stronger desire for their parents to reunite after the divorce, but the remarriage was evidence that the reuniting of their natural parents was not possible.

Another reason why this category was perceived as slightly stressful for the subject may be that they feel genuinely more contented and happy in their stepfamily life than they did in their nuclear family. Also the stepchildren may not feel positively toward their absentee parent as a result of their previous experiences in the nuclear family. This category was not significantly stressful for the subjects in the Lutz (1980) study. These results seem to suggest that most of the subjects feel positively about the

remarriage, and that the desire for their natural parents to reunite is not a major issue to most adolescent stepchildren. This information, supplemented with further research in this area, can be helpful to counselors dealing with parents and stepparents.

Member of two households. This category addresses the fact that stepchildren are often considered members of two households by themselves and their parents. This category was also not perceived as highly stressful by the subjects. Also, this category was not found to be significantly stressful in the Lutz (1980) study. Although some of the literature suggests that being a member of two households is potentially stressful for stepchildren (Capaldi & McRae, 1979; Roosevelt & Lofas, 1977), it appears that adolescents are generally able to cope with the situation. This may be partially a result of good will and cooperation between the two natural parents. Another reason why this situation is not very stressful for the subjects may be that they are not often confronted with the demands of two households. Adolescents typically are developing a life outside the family structure. Their time is often filled with school activities and time with friends. Perhaps these subjects do not visit their absentee parents often due to their need for activities away from the family. Also, because adolescents often have the ability to see situations without adult prejudices, the subjects may understand their natural parents' relationship. Therefore, they are able to spend time in two households and adjust to different rules. More research from the stepchild's perspective would be valuable. It would seem that it is much more stressful for

the stepchild not to be able to maintain a relationship with the absentee parent than it is to adjust to two households.

Social issues. The category of stress which the subjects found to be the least stressful was the category of social issues. The importance that the literature places on the socialization of adolescents may not be as significant in terms of stepfamily adjustment as previously stated (Capaldi & McRae, 1979; Duberman, 1975). It is interesting to note that adolescents are viewed by professionals as struggling through a developmental stage where peer acceptance is extremely important, yet this category was perceived as the least stressful by the subjects. These findings support the Lutz (1980) study in which the area of social attitudes was perceived as the least stressful area of stepfamily living by the subjects.

One reason why this category may not be perceived as stressful is that divorce and remarriage may be a much more acceptable phenomenon in today's society. Perhaps stepchildren do not feel different as a result of living in a stepfamily because many others in their peer group live in similar family units. Another implication of these findings is that adolescents may be more involved in their life outside the family. Therefore, living in a stepfamily may not be an issue that is important to them in terms of their social life with their friends. Professionals need to be aware of the possibility that many adolescents may not need support in dealing with significant others on becoming stepfamily members. This is a very important factor for school counselors to be aware of when counseling their

students.

It seems as if adolescent stepchildren can and are adjusting to society's reactions concerning stepfamilies. In fact, the social stigma attached to stepfamilies may be a myth conceived in the minds of those adults who have had difficulty in adjusting to stepfamily life.

Demographic Variables

Amount of time spent in the stepfamily. One major finding in this study dealt with the relationship of time spent in the stepfamily to the perceived stress of the adolescent stepchildren who participated in this study. Much of the current literature suggests that the first few years of stepfamily life are the most stressful (Lutz, 1980; Schulman, 1972; Visher & Visher, 1979). The results of this study do not support this premise. Those subjects who had lived in a stepfamily two to three years and three to four yielded higher mean stress scores than the subjects who had lived in a stepfamily zero to two years. Lutz (1980) found a significant positive relationship between stress and the amount of time a child had lived in a stepfamily. Those subjects who had lived in a stepfamily two years or less reported more stress than those who had lived in a stepfamily more than two years. The discrepancy between the Lutz study and the present study merits consideration. Since all of the subjects in this present study were adolescents when they became stepchildren, perhaps this study depicts a truer picture of adolescent stress as it relates to time spent in the stepfamily. Perhaps

when stepfamily life improves it is not because of time spent in the stepfamily, but rather due to the willingness of the family members to cooperate and try to understand one another. When there are problems in a nuclear family, time does not make the problems go away. Either the problem gets worse, the family members seek help to solve the problem, or the family members work together to solve the problem. In any case, giving false hope to stepfamily members that time alone will "make things better" seems in error for professionals.

Another reason for the increase in stress for the subjects after living in the stepfamily for two years may be related to their desire to help make the stepfamily a positive environment. When the stepfamily forms, the stepchild may not experience difficulties due to family members' overzealous efforts to make the family an ideal situation. After family life settles into a routine, stress may manifest itself in areas such as discipline and the relationship with the absentee parent. The stepparent and parent may not exhibit the same type of behaviors that they did during the initial stage of the remarriage. It is possible that the first two years of stepfamily life are not reported in this study as stressful as subsequent years because stepfamily members may be on their "best behavior" during the initial stage of the blending process. We do not know why, but it appears from this study that stress does not necessarily diminish over time spent in the stepfamily, and that the first two years of stepfamily life may not be the most stressful.

Another factor dealing with time spent in the stepfamily may be the initial relief felt by many stepfamily members. Often previous family life has been unpleasant for both parents and children. After some time this initial reassurance from the remarriage may wear off, and stepfamily members begin to deal with every-day family problems. Therefore, it may be more stressful to live in a stepfamily after the first few years than it is during the first two years. These findings concerning time spent in the stepfamily are important since they challenge many of the expert's statements that the first two years of stepfamily life are the most stressful. More research is needed before any definite conclusions concerning this issue can be made.

Time spent with one parent before the remarriage. The results of this study pertaining to time spent with one parent before the remarriage do not concur with much of the current literature (Capaldi & McRae, 1979; Visher & Visher, 1979) which suggests that the longer the time spent with a single parent, the more difficult the adjustment for the stepchildren upon entrance into the stepfamily. This study found that those subjects who had lived with a single parent nine or more years reported the lowest level of stress. Surprisingly, the highest mean stress score was reported for those subjects who had lived with a single parent from only zero to three years. This study does concur with the results of the Lutz (1980) study in which no significance was found between time spent with a single parent and the level of stress for the stepchild. It is apparent that it is not safe to assume that the longer the time spent with a

single parent the higher the reported level of stress. This may be due to the decrease in dependency of adolescents upon their parents. Adolescents may feel relieved that their parent has found someone to be a part of their life. This affords the adolescent the opportunity to go on with activities with their peer group. Perhaps adolescent stepchildren, like other adolescents, are involved in their own lives and concerns more than younger children. The involvement of a stepparent in their lives may not be a threatening experience in terms of their relationship with the natural parent that they live with.

In any case, this study does not support the premise that the longer the time spent with a single parent before the remarriage, the higher the level of stress for the stepchild. The results of this study tentatively suggest that the opposite may occur more often for adolescent stepchildren. This information could be valuable for counselors helping single parents adjust to the transition into remarriage. It would also be valuable to school counselors to use this information to reassure adolescents that their parent's remarriage need not change their relationship with their parent they had lived with for some time.

Stepmother vs. stepfather families. This study yielded very little difference between the mean stress scores of those stepchildren living with stepmothers and those living with stepfathers. This does not support the current literature, which suggests that stepmother families are more stressful (Capaldi & McRae, 1979; Duberman, 1975; Maddox, 1975). These findings suggest that the sex

of the stepparent may not be a factor in stepfamily life. The myth of the "wicked stepmother" may have never been a factor, or possibly it is fading as stepfamily life becomes more acceptable.

Another important finding of this study is that there was little difference in the level of stress between stepmother/stepdaughter and stepfather/stepdaughter relationships. Visher and Visher (1979) suggest that the stepmother/stepdaughter relationship is the most difficult to establish.

Although there is slight stress reported in these areas, the differences do not support the results of previous research and study. Before statements can be made suggesting that the stepmother/stepdaughter relationship is the most stressful, further research is needed in this area.

Presence of resident stepsiblings. The results of this study indicate that there was little difference in the overall level of stress for subjects living with stepsiblings and those not living with stepsiblings. Some researchers report that the presence of stepsiblings causes more stress (Lutz, 1980), while others report that stepsiblings can create a positive atmosphere (Duberman, 1975). Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) report that overall the stepchildren who participated in their study liked and appreciated their stepsiblings. This was especially true when the parenting was fair and tactful.

It may be that those subjects who were living with stepsiblings were treated fairly by both parent and stepparent during the initial blending process. Thus feelings of rivalry and being treated

unjustly may not have entered into the stepchild's frame of reference. Also, it is likely that the stepchildren liked each other and welcomed the availability of a larger group of peers within the household (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

These findings should be an indication to parents and step-parents that joining two families together need not be stressful.

Presence of resident half siblings. The mean stress scores for those subjects residing with half siblings and those not residing with half siblings yielded little difference. Due to the small sample size of only 13 stepchildren residing with half siblings, it is difficult to draw conclusions. As with the area of stepsiblings, professionals have mixed views regarding the presence of the half sibling in the stepfamily. Duberman (1975) found that the presence of half siblings may have a positive effect upon the stepfamily. However, her study was based upon the impressions of parents and stepparents, not the children involved. It may be that parents and stepparents long for a child of their own, and see this occurrence as a positive experience for the family members. It may be that the arrival of a new baby into the family structure may or may not be a stepfamily issue. The acceptance of the new half sibling may depend more on the personality of the adolescent involved than the stepfamily issues raised in the literature. Lutz (1980) found no significant relationship between the presence of half siblings and the perceived level of stress scores of her subjects.

The entrance of a half sibling into the family may not be

stressful for adolescents because they may be beyond the rivalry often experienced by younger children who are striving to find their place and develop their lifestyle in the family. As stated earlier, adolescents may be more involved with their life outside the family and do not see the half sibling as a threat. Finally, adolescents may respond positively to their parent's happiness related to the new child. Parents and stepparents should be reassured by therapists that the decision to have a child of their own does not mean that this experience will necessarily be stressful for their adolescent stepchildren.

Reasons for dissolution of the previous marriage. Lutz (1980) found that there was a greater likelihood for stress if the previous marriage ended as a result of death rather than divorce. Duberman (1975) reports opposite findings. She concludes that if the previous marriage ended in death there was a greater likelihood for family integration than if the previous marriage ended in divorce. The results of this study yield little difference between the mean stress scores of those subjects who had experienced the death of a parent and those who had experienced the divorce of their natural parents. The number of stepchildren who experienced the death of a parent is small. No definite conclusions can be drawn from these results. The inconsistencies in the current literature warrant further research in this area.

It may be that the reason for the dissolution of the previous marriage need not be a factor in the blending process if parents and stepparents cooperate to make the blending experience positive

for the adolescent.

Sex of the subjects. The difference between the mean stress scores for male and female subjects was slight. Lutz (1980) found if the respondent was female, there was a greater likelihood of stress. This may be due to the greater openness that adolescent females generally exhibit. Adolescent males are generally more reluctant to express their feelings, especially if they are negative feelings. In any case, this study shows no conclusive evidence that females experience more stress in stepfamily living than do males. As with other stepfamily issues, it seems that the amount of stress experienced by adolescents may depend more upon the manner in which parents and stepparents present and facilitate the blending process rather than demographic issues such as the sex of the stepchild.

Open-ended questions. Fifty-eight of the 63 subjects who participated in this study responded to the open-ended question, "From your experiences, what statement on the questionnaire is the most stressful situation in stepfamily life for you?" Seven subjects indicated that the question, "Being expected to call a stepparent mom or dad" was the most stressful situation for them. This was also the question that received the highest mean stress score. This indicates that this may be a particularly stressful situation for adolescents. When calling a stepparent "Mom" or "Dad", the adolescent may experience strong feelings of disloyalty to their absentee parent, living or dead. Also, stepchildren simply may not view their step-

parent in a parental role. Parents and stepparents need to be aware of the stress that this unrealistic expectation may cause for adolescents. Perhaps parents and stepparents feel that this will bind the family together without being aware that it can produce negative results. Five subjects responded to the question, "Hearing one natural parent talking negatively about the other natural parent." This question also addresses the issue of loyalty that an adolescent stepchild feels for the natural parent and/or absentee parent. The adolescent may have a long family history with the absentee parent. Even if this history was not a positive one, many stepchildren tend to idealize their absentee parent. Also the adolescent may feel very loyal to the parent that they live with. Hearing one natural parent talking negatively about the other could then become a stressful experience for the stepchild. The results of the open-ended questions indicate that parents may need assistance from professionals in order to create an atmosphere in which the stepchild feels free to pursue a relationship with both natural parents without fear of being caught in the middle.

Implications of the Study

The implications of this study will be of importance to helping professionals counseling and teaching stepfamily members, parents, stepparents, and non-custodial parents. The implications of the study are presented in four areas: (1) the category of stress that was the most stressful for the adolescent subjects; (2) the categories of stress that were the least stressful for the adolescent

subjects; (3) the results concerning time spent in a stepfamily as it relates to stress; and (4) adolescent problems versus stepfamily problems. This information has special relevance to those stepfamilies in which adolescents are present.

It came as no surprise that the category of discipline had the highest mean stress score. It is important for helping professionals, natural parents, and stepparents to be aware of this issue and develop strategies for effectively disciplining their adolescent stepchildren. It would be valuable for school counselors to develop programs that would train parents and stepparents in regard to discipline and heighten their awareness of this potentially stressful area. Although discipline is not just a stepfamily issue, it is possible that discipline problems may be more acute in a stepfamily than in a nuclear family. This may be especially true for a stepparent who has had no experience in raising children. Pre-marital training for these persons can be extremely valuable and conducive to a harmonious blending process.

The two categories of stress receiving the lowest mean stress scores from the subjects were member of two households and social issues. Being considered a member of two households did not seem to be a particularly stressful experience for those subjects who participated in this study. This area was also found to be one of the least stressful areas in the Lutz (1980) study. Perhaps adolescents are able to cope successfully with being a member of two households. This implication can be important for the helping professional who is counseling the absentee parent, the stepparent, and the adolescent

stepchild. It seems that there do exist strategies for facilitating the stepchild's transition from one household to another. The sharing of these strategies in parent groups and stepchildren groups would be valuable. This could be facilitated by the school counselor.

The category surrounding social issues were deemed to be the least stressful area of stepfamily living for the 63 subjects. This was also the case in the Lutz (1980) study. This is a positive indication that adolescent stepchildren are able to handle the social stigma of living in a stepfamily. It could be that adults feel the pressures from this stigma more than adolescents. With the growing numbers of divorce and remarriage, perhaps the social stigma attached to stepfamilies is not as severe as many adults, including the helping professionals, perceive it to be. In any case, parents who have a concern that their adolescent will not be able to adjust socially if they become a stepfamily member, should be reassured by helping professionals that this does not seem to be a major concern to adolescents. Also it would be valuable for helping professionals to help parents and stepparents realize that the adolescent sub-culture has different values than those of adults. This, in turn, could aid parents and stepparents to understand the adolescent more clearly and interact more positively in terms of social issues and their ramifications.

The third implication of this study pertains to the time the stepchild has spent in the stepfamily related to the reported level of stress. Although this researcher expected to find the level of stress higher for those stepchildren who had lived in their step-

family zero to two years, this was not the case. It would be important for helping professionals to assist parents and step-parents in understanding that the first two years may be a period of adjusting and finding one's place in the stepfamily. After this "settling in" period, stepfamily members may feel freer to express negative feelings concerning issues such as discipline. We do not know if the stress experienced by adolescents during the second and third years of stepfamily life is different from the stress that all adolescents feel as a result of their family life. This concept of time deserves attention from researchers due to the fact that stress may not necessarily diminish over time for adolescent stepchildren.

Rosenbaum and Rosenbaum state, "most normal adolescents usually feel misunderstood by and isolated from their parents" (p. 106). For this reason and other circumstances unique to adolescents, professionals generally agree that adolescence is the most difficult time to enter into stepfamily life. The total mean stress score for the 63 adolescent subjects was 2.12. Although there is some slight stress reported here, this number is well below the halfway point of 2.5 on the response scale. This is a positive indication that adolescents can readily adjust to stepfamily living.

The results of this study also suggest that not only are adolescents able to cope with stepfamily living, but that much of the stress that adolescents experience is not related to stepfamily living. For example, the filler question "Feeling that your opinion as a teenager is not taken seriously" was the question rated most stressful by the subjects in this study. "Feeling like

you are not given the trust and responsibility you are able to handle" is another filler item which the subjects rated above the 2.5 point on the response scale. These situations are not stepfamily issues, and yet they were rated as much more stressful than most of the stepfamily issues. The stress that the adolescents in this study expressed concerning discipline and parental understanding may also be more closely related to adolescent stress than stepfamily stress. Overall, this study suggests that adolescent stepchildren may experience stress as a result of their struggle through their adolescent years rather than wholly as a result of becoming a stepchild. Also, this study suggests that the stress that adolescent stepchildren experience is not as intense as the literature suggests. These findings imply that a better understanding of stepfamily issues would help professionals guide stepfamily members through the blending process so that they are not burdened by stepfamily myths that have a negative influence upon the stepfamily. It may be that stepfamily life could reduce stress for the adolescent, and school counselors could have a valuable impact upon stepfamily members if they incorporate this possibility into their counseling strategies.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are several recommendations to consider for future stepfamily research. The number of subjects in this study was only 63. It would be helpful for professionals to conduct studies involving greater numbers of subjects chosen randomly from stepfamily populations.

As evidenced by this discussion, there is a great deal of inconsistency in the stepfamily literature dealing with the potentially stressful stepfamily issues. This is due, in part, to the inferences made in the literature that are based upon personal experiences and guesses. More research is needed based on empirical studies from which conclusions can be drawn. Within these research studies, subjects need to be drawn from the general stepfamily population, not from clinical populations as they have been in previous studies.

It would be helpful to obtain information concerning family stress from adolescents who do not live in stepfamilies, since it is possible that adolescent stepchildren experience a great deal of their stress as a result of adolescence and not stepfamily living.

Since this study did not confirm the assumption made by several professionals that stress does diminish over time for stepchildren, it would be valuable to obtain data from longitudinal studies that investigate stepfamily stress over some period of time.

It would also be valuable to research the attitudes and feelings of adult stepfamily members and how these affect adolescent stepchildren. It seems that many of the potentially stressful areas of stepfamily living suggested by the literature may be considered more stressful by adults than stepchildren.

Finally, more information concerning healthy stepfamilies and their strategies for success is needed in order to give encouragement and hope to stepfamily members that the stepfamily can be a positive and harmonious environment in which to live.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
CONSENT FORM

CONSENT FORM

Dear Parent/Guardian and Student:

I am Jo Anna Strother, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Counseling and Rehabilitation at West Virginia University. I have been given permission by your County School System to conduct a project in your school. The project is titled, "Adolescent Stress as it Relates to Stepfamily Living." The project will involve the student answering an anonymous questionnaire which takes approximately 15 minutes to complete. No names will be recorded on the questionnaire or any part of the study. In answering the questionnaire the student will be asked to respond to statements concerning his/her feelings about stepfamily living. In completing this project, it is the hope of the investigator to obtain results that will help school counselors and teachers better understand and assist adolescents enter smoothly into stepfamily living.

The participants' responses will be totally anonymous, and there are no known risks involved in answering the questionnaire. This project will be conducted during the participants' out-of-class time (i.e. homeroom); therefore it will not interfere with the students' school work. If you are willing for your son/daughter to participate in this project, please read the following statements along with your son/daughter. If you are in agreement, please sign your name below. Thank you.

Jo Anna Strother

As the parent/guardian of the participant in the study being conducted by Jo Anna Strother of West Virginia University:

As a participant in the study being conducted by Jo Anna Strother of West Virginia University:

I understand that participation in the study will only require the participants' answering an anonymous questionnaire.

I understand that the study's purpose is to help school personnel better understand and assist adolescents entering stepfamily living. I understand that there are no known risks. I understand that the questionnaire will be administered by the homeroom teacher and collected by the school counselor.

I understand that the completed questionnaires will be secured under lock in the school counselor's office until obtained by the investigator, who will also secure the questionnaires in a locked location. I understand that the student's questionnaire will be totally anonymous with no names recorded on any part of the study. I

understand that the results from the student's questionnaire will be used for research purposes only.

I understand that I have the opportunity to inquire as to the procedures of this study by contacting the investigator. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time without reason or fear of prejudice.

I understand that participation in this study is voluntary.

I understand that the Department of Health and Human Services and West Virginia University policy state:

"It is not the policy of the Department of Health and Human Services, other federal agencies, state institutions and agencies, and private institutions and agencies which are funding the research project in which you are participating to compensate or provide medical treatment for human subjects in the event the research results in injury."

I have been informed as to the nature of this project. I hereby voluntarily give my consent for my son/daughter to participate in this study being conducted by Jo Anna Strother of West Virginia University.

Name (print) _____
Parent/Guardian

Signature _____
Parent/Guardian

Date _____

Location _____
School

I have been informed as to the nature of this project. I hereby voluntarily agree to participate in the study being conducted by Jo Anna Strother of West Virginia University.

*If you have any questions about the procedures of this project, feel free to contact Jo Anna Strother at 366-7373.

Name _____

Signature _____
Student

Date _____

Location _____
School

APPENDIX B
LETTER TO TEACHERS AND COUNSELORS

Dear Counselor/Teacher

I have been given permission by your county school system via your guidance director to conduct a study in your county.

For the past two years I have been studying stepfamilies and the unique characteristics of this family group. I am particularly interested, as a high school counselor, in the adjustment of teenagers to stepfamily life and the stresses that they face.

As a part of my program as a doctoral candidate at West Virginia University in the Counseling and Rehabilitation Department, I am asking teenage stepchildren to answer an anonymous questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire is to ascertain what teenagers deem most stressful in stepfamily life. The questionnaire will be administered to those stepchildren who entered their stepfamily between the ages of 12 and 19.

I am asking for your help in my efforts to study this long-ignored situation faced by many of your students. I realize that your schedule is full and your time precious, as I too work in a high school setting full time.

I am requesting your assistance in obtaining parental permission through the consent forms and in administration of the questionnaire to those students returning the signed consent forms.

Your help is greatly appreciated. Please feel free to contact me or your County Guidance Director.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Jo Anna Strother
Doctoral Candidate
Counseling and Rehabilitation
West Virginia University
366-7373

APPENDIX C
PERMISSION FOR USE OF LUTZ QUESTIONNAIRE



EAST TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY

July 29, 1980

Mrs. Joey Strother
1806 Sunnyview Lane
Fairmont, West Virginia 26554

Re: Permission to use Questionnaire

To Whom It May Concern:

Joey Strother has my permission to use the questionnaire found in Appendix F of my dissertation entitled "Stepfamilies: A Descriptive Study From The Adolescent Perspective". This study was copyrighted and submitted to the graduate school of West Virginia University, May, 1980.

Sincerely,

Dr. Patricia Lutz

PL:sph

APPENDIX D
COVER LETTER TO STUDENTS



West Virginia
University

Dear Student:

We are asking for your help.

We are from the Department of Counseling and Rehabilitation at West Virginia University. For the past two years we have been studying stepfamilies and the adjustments that stepfamily members face. We are especially interested in finding out what teenagers feel are the most stressful situations they face upon entering a stepfamily. In order to obtain this valuable information, we are asking for your opinions on the following questionnaire in order to help other teenagers adjust smoothly to stepfamily life.

Your answers to the statements in the questionnaire will be confidential, and we are not asking for your name on the questionnaire. Therefore, your answers will be totally anonymous. In answering the questionnaire, you may refrain from answering any item you wish to omit, and you may withdraw your consent at any time.

If you would like to know the results of this study, feel free to contact your school counselor in April.

Your help is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Dr. Edward Jacobs
Associate Professor

Jo Anna Strother
Doctoral Student

APPENDIX E
DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FORM

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA SHEET

Please complete the following information:

1. Present age _____
2. Birth Date _____
3. Sex: Male _____ Female _____
4. Age at which you became a member of a stepfamily _____
5. Number of years you have lived in a stepfamily _____
6. Number of years you have lived with just one parent prior to the remarriage _____
7. Did your first family end in (1) death of a parent _____ (2) divorce/separation _____ (check one)

Please check the family members living full time in your home:

8. Mother _____
9. Stepmother _____
10. Father _____
11. Stepfather _____
12. Brother(s) _____
13. Stepbrother(s) _____
14. Sister(s) _____
15. Stepsister(s) _____
16. Half brother(s) _____
17. Half sister(s) _____

APPENDIX F
DIRECTIONS FOR COMPLETING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

DIRECTIONS FOR COMPLETING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

As you complete this questionnaire, please keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers. We are only interested in how you feel.

On this questionnaire there are 41 statements that describe a part of stepfamily living. Please read each statement carefully and then circle the number which best shows your feelings about the statement. We are asking you to circle one number that tells how each statement applies to your life in your stepfamily. Here are examples of how to answer the questionnaire:

For example, Number 1 reads:

Having to tell your teachers and your friends at school that you have a stepparent.

If that experience is very stressful for you, circle #4.

If that experience is somewhat stressful for you, circle #3.

If that experience is slightly stressful, circle #2.

If that experience is not stressful, circle #1.

Remember, the numbers mean:

#4 Very stressful

#3 Somewhat stressful

#2 Slightly stressful

#1 Not stressful

SECTION I of the questionnaire contains 24 items that could apply to all stepfamilies. Please answer all 24 items.

Section II of the questionnaire contains statements about stepfamily life that may or may not apply to you. For example, Number 2 in Section II reads:

Adjusting to having a new stepbrother(s) or stepsister(s)

If you do not have stepbrothers or stepsisters, you will not circle an answer. Please answer all statements that apply to you.

Section III of the questionnaire contains questions that ask for answers other than circling a number. Please read these questions and answer them as completely as possible.

Thank you again for your help!

APPENDIX G
QUESTIONNAIRE

QUESTIONNAIRE

	Not stressful	Slightly stressful	Somewhat stressful	Very stressful
<u>SECTION I.</u> Please answer all of these questions.				
1. Having to tell your teachers and friends at school that you have a stepparent.	1	2	3	4
2. Feeling pressure to "make this family work."	1	2	3	4
3. Adjusting to having a stepparent after living with one parent for some time.	1	2	3	4
4. Being expected to call a stepparent "Mom" or "Dad."	1	2	3	4
5. Adjusting to living with a new set of rules from your stepparent.	1	2	3	4
6. Feeling different from your friends because you have a stepparent.	1	2	3	4
7. Feeling a lack of communication in your family.	1	2	3	4
8. Being expected to like or love a stepparent.	1	2	3	4
9. Feeling pressured to spend time with your family.	1	2	3	4
10. Wanting to live only with your natural parent that you had been living with before the remarriage.	1	2	3	4
11. Dealing with the differences between what is expected of you by your natural parent and your stepparent.	1	2	3	4
12. Experiencing "not being out on your own" at this time.	1	2	3	4
13. Sharing your natural parent with your stepparent.	1	2	3	4
14. Having to explain why your name is different from others in your family.	1	2	3	4

	Not stressful	Slightly stressful	Somewhat stressful	Very stressful
15. Hearing your parent and stepparent disagreeing or arguing.	1	2	3	4
16. Feeling that your opinion as a teenager is not taken seriously.	1	2	3	4
17. Accepting discipline from a stepparent.	1	2	3	4
18. Feeling that your views on helping to "make the stepfamily work" are sometimes not important to your natural parent and/or stepparent.	1	2	3	4
19. Feeling that your relationship with your natural parent has been changed because you now have a stepparent.	1	2	3	4
20. Feeling that the parent and stepparent that you live with will "split up."	1	2	3	4
21. Feeling less important now than when you did not live in a stepfamily.	1	2	3	4
22. Feeling that your efforts to improve the stepfamily are sometimes overlooked by your natural parent and/or stepparent.	1	2	3	4
23. Feeling that your natural parent needs less support from you than he/she did during the period of time between the divorce/death and the remarriage.	1	2	3	4
24. Feeling that your natural parent and/or stepparent do not understand the changes you have faced as a result of the stepfamily.	1	2	3	4

SECTION II. Please answer each question that applies to you. If the situation does not apply, do not circle an answer.

For example: If you have a natural parent that you do not live with, please answer those questions that relate to that parent.

If you have stepbrothers/stepsisters or half brothers or half sisters, please answer those questions that relate to them.

	Not stressful	Slightly stressful	Somewhat stressful	Very stressful
25. Longing for your family to "be the way it used to be" when your natural parents were together.	1	2	3	4
26. Adjusting to having a new stepbrother(s) or stepsister(s).	1	2	3	4
27. Feeling like you are not given the trust and responsibility you are able to handle.	1	2	3	4
28. Feeling excluded from the parent you do not live with.	1	2	3	4
29. Liking a stepparent more than your natural parent that you do not live with.	1	2	3	4
30. Feeling "caught in the middle" between your two natural parents.	1	2	3	4
31. Wanting your parent and stepparent to break up.	1	2	3	4
32. Spending holidays and special occasions away from one of your natural parents.	1	2	3	4
33. Hearing one natural parent talking negatively about the other natural parent.	1	2	3	4
34. Deciding in which household to spend holidays and special occasions.	1	2	3	4
35. Adjusting to another set of rules when you are visiting the parent you do not live with.	1	2	3	4
36. Adjusting to the rules at home after you have been visiting the parent you do not live with.	1	2	3	4
37. Deciding what to do after high school.	1	2	3	4

	Not stressful	Slightly stressful	Somewhat stressful	Very stressful
38. Adjusting to a new position in the family (for example, if you were the oldest child in your natural family and now you have an older step-brother or stepsister).	1	2	3	4
39. Wanting your natural parents to get back together.	1	2	3	4
40. Adjusting to having a half brother(s) or half sister(s) (the natural child of your natural parent and stepparent).	1	2	3	4
41. Not being able to visit a parent who does not live with you.	1	2	3	4

SECTION III. The following questions ask for an answer other than circling a number. It is very important that you answer #1. Numbers 2 and 3 you may or may not choose to answer. Your opinions and answers are appreciated.

1. From your experiences, what statement on the questionnaire is the most stressful situation in stepfamily life for you? Please write the number of that statement on the line below.

2. What other situations in stepfamily living not mentioned in this questionnaire do you find stressful? Please write them on the lines below.

3. Other comments: _____

APPENDIX H
FREQUENCY COUNTS OF DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

APPENDIX H

Frequency Counts of Demographic Data

Age	<u>13</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>16</u>	<u>17</u>	<u>18</u>
	3	10	10	18	19	3
Sex	<u>Male</u>			<u>Female</u>		
	28			35		
Length of Time Spent in a Stepfamily (years)	<u>0-2</u>	<u>2-3</u>	<u>3-4</u>	<u>4-6</u>		
	13	16	20	14		
Age Subjects Became a Member of a Stepfamily	<u>12</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>16</u>	
	30	14	7	7	5	
Length of Time Spent with One Parent Before the Remarriage (years)	<u>0-3</u>	<u>3-5</u>	<u>5-8</u>	<u>9 and above</u>		
	24	17	12	8		
Stepmother/Stepfather families	<u>Stepmother</u>		<u>Stepfather</u>			
	18		40			
Stepsiblings/No Stepsiblings	<u>Stepsiblings Present</u>		<u>No Stepsiblings Present</u>			
	17		33			
Half siblings/ No Half siblings	<u>Half siblings Present</u>		<u>No Half siblings Present</u>			
	13		33			
Reason for Dissolution of the Nuclear Family	<u>Death</u>		<u>Divorce</u>			
	8		55			

APPENDIX I
ANSWERS TO THE FIRST OPEN-ENDED QUESTION

APPENDIX I

Question: From your experience, what statement on the questionnaire is the most stressful situation in stepfamily life for you?

Responses:

Two subjects listed question #1: Having to tell your teachers and friends at school that you have a stepparent.

Three subjects listed question #2: Feeling pressure to "make this family work."

Seven subjects listed question #4: Being expected to call a stepparent "Mom" or "Dad."

Three subjects listed question #5: Adjusting to living with a new set of rules from your stepparent.

One subject listed question #7: Feeling a lack of communication in your family.

One subject listed question #8: Being expected to like or love a stepparent.

One subject listed question #12: Experiencing "not being out on your own" at this time.

One subject listed question #13: Sharing your natural parent with your stepparent.

Four subjects listed question #15: Hearing your parent and stepparent disagreeing or arguing.

Four subjects listed question #16: Feeling that your opinion as a teenager is not taken seriously.

Three subjects listed question #17: Accepting discipline from a stepparent.

Two subjects listed question #19: Feeling that your relationship with your natural parent has been changed because you now have a stepparent.

One subject listed question #21: Feeling less important now than when you did not live in a stepfamily.

One subject listed question #24: Feeling that your natural parent and/or stepparent do not understand the changes you have faced as a result of the stepfamily.

Three subjects listed question #27: Feeling like you are not given the trust and responsibility you are able to handle.

Two subjects listed question #28: Feeling excluded from the parent you do not live with.

One subject listed question #29: Liking a stepparent more than your natural parent that you do not live with.

Three subjects listed question #30: Feeling "caught in the middle" between your two natural parents.

One subject listed question #32: Spending holidays and special occasions away from one of your natural parents.

Five subjects listed question #33: Hearing one natural parent talking negatively about the other natural parent.

Two subjects listed question #34: Deciding in which household to spend holidays and special occasions.

One subject listed question #37: Deciding what to do after high school.

Two subjects listed question #38: Adjusting to a new position in the family (for example, if you were the oldest child in your natural family and now you have an older stepbrother or stepsister).

One subject listed question #39: Wanting your natural parents together again.

One subject listed question #40: Adjusting to having a half brother(s) or halfsister(s) (the natural child of your natural parent and stepparent).

Two subjects listed question #41: Not being able to visit a parent who does not live with you.

APPENDIX J
ANSWERS TO THE SECOND OPEN-ENDED QUESTION

APPENDIX J

Question: What other situations in stepfamily living not mentioned in this questionnaire do you find stressful?

Responses:

My stepsister gets yelled at. She is always bringing in my name. When stepsister and I fight, stepfather takes it out on my mother.

The feeling of your stepparent being your boss.

Their kids getting treated better. The rules they go by.

Having jealousy of other kids in the family (stepsisters or brothers).

Favoritism of own children by a stepmother.

Your stepsister getting away with some things and I don't get away with others and the things she does are worse.

I feel it's very stressful when you're pushed into loving your stepparent when you hardly know them.

Controlling the severe hate for the stepfather.

When stepparents feel that we (the family) don't care for him/her.

Money. My dad seems to think that since I work parttime, I can afford everything I need. My mom does not work; therefore, she can't afford to give me any.

I find it hard living with my stepbrothers during the summer and having to give up certain things that belong to me.

Not understand how I feel about things.

Having to do something for one parent because the other feels sorry for him/her. Stepparent taking advantage of the marriage.

Being accused of not liking my stepmother because my mother told me not to. Which isn't true.

Fights between stepparents and real parents. Arguments.

My halfbrother left home because of a disagreement between he and my stepfather.

Unfair to stepchild. Favors their own child more than you.

Not knowing where my real dad is.

Trying to get along with them.

Stepfather thinking he knows everyone around where we live because he grew up with them. Some of my friends he doesn't think I should hang around with, he says he knows what they're like, but he doesn't.

Going to a movie or somewhere in public together.

Stepparent and natural parent (the one you're not living with) arguing for no certain reason. Jealousy of stepparent towards the parent you're not living with.

Drinking problem.

None really because I never really knew my natural father so my stepfather is the only father I've ever known.

When stepsisters and stepbrothers get away with more than I do.

I find my father unreliable. He only has to pay \$75.00 per month and he does not even do that.

Being jealous of my half sister. She gets whatever she wants. She gets babied by her father way too much.

When you first get into a stepfamily the stepparent doesn't know how to act around you. They want you to like them but sometimes you don't.

I find it hard to accept discipline sometimes.

Trying to talk to your stepparent seriously.

To get a hold of the parent that you're not living with.

I'd like to feel closer to my stepfather. When he leaves all discipline to my mother, I feel alienated from him. But if he did discipline me, I don't think I'd like it. It's confusing.

Having to ask a natural parent for money or other expenses.

It's strange sometimes I feel that I should say Mom and Dad and not Mom and Roger. Sometimes I almost do. I'd feel weird if I would say that, I don't know why though.

I find it hard to talk to my stepparent. My stepparent looks out for things I do wrong.

I really didn't have a hard time adjusting to my stepfather because he lived with us for a while and I got to like him very much.

APPENDIX K
ANSWERS TO THE THIRD OPEN-ENDED QUESTION

APPENDIX K

Question: Other comments.

Responses:

I hate my stepsister. My stepfather is more concerned about me than my real father. He is too strict.

My stepsister acts like we're no relation in public places. She's ashamed of me.

I wish my parents were back together.

I don't find it hard to tell people I have a stepparent because I'm not ashamed of him.

This is a very good idea. It may be able to help kids who do have problems with stepfamilies.

It is my experience that either the stepparent tries to get the stepson/daughter to accept him/her, or that they have negative feelings toward the stepson/daughter.

I feel both natural parents should always be a part of your life, and that the child should decide how often they want to visit the parent they're not living with.

None of these things cause me any stress--just dislike.

I lived with my dad and stepmother for one year--it did not work out. Since then it seems that my dad refuses to let me close to him like we used to be. All he cares about is her and her daughter. My mom and I don't get along very well but I would rather live with her than see my stepmother run my father's life.

I like my stepfather as much and sometimes more than my real father.

I like living with my stepfather. It's better to me than my real dad.

I also can't seem to accept punishment from my stepfather and I don't like it when he argues with my sister.

If the child is explained to what is really happening it would be much easier on him/her.

It's hard to adjust to and sometimes I miss my dad.

I love my stepfather as if he were my natural father and our family gets along great with no problems just you ordinary everyday family.

I feel that my stepfather treats me more like a father than my own father does.

Stepfamilies are a hard thing to deal with and children shouldn't be made to call them mom or dad or anything like that.

It's hard to lose a father. It's hard knowing your stepparents aren't your real parents.

It was hard at first, but it's o.k. now. I'm not trusted very often. My stepfather is only 27 and he thinks he knows how I feel at 17.

My mother has been married 3 times, and I find it hard to keep from wondering how long this one will last.

I have had 3 different stepfathers, 1 stepbrother, 3 half brothers, 2 half sisters. Mom's married 5 times, 4 since I was born.

I don't like my stepfather and never will. He has changed my mom and I don't care if I never see either one after I'm married.

APPENDIX L
DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES CATEGORIZED ACCORDING TO
MEAN STRESS SCORES

APPENDIX L

Demographic Variables Categorized According to Mean Stress Scores

Demographic Variables	Mean Stress Scores
Stepmother vs. Stepfather families N=57	Subjects living with a stepmother 2.18(18) Subjects living with a stepfather 2.04(39)
Stepmother/Stepdaughter Stepmother/Stepson Relationships N=20	Stepdaughter living with a stepmother 1.98(10) Stepsons living with a stepmother 2.17(10)
Stepfather/Stepdaughter Stepfather/Stepson Relationships N=37	Stepsons living with a stepfather 2.09(15) Stepdaughters living with a stepfather 2.10(22)
Stepsiblings/Halfsiblings Present N=35	Subjects living with stepsiblings 2.20(17) Subjects living with halfsiblings 2.29(13) Subjects living with both step-siblings and half-siblings 2.25(5)
No Stepsibling/Halfsiblings N=33	Subjects not living with stepsiblings or halfsiblings 2.18(33)
Reason for the Dissolution of Previous Marriage N=63	Death 2.26(8) Divorce 2.13(55)
Sex of the Subjects N=63	Male 2.07(28) Female 2.17(35)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to ascertain what adolescents who become stepchildren between the ages of 13 and 18 believe to be the stressful and non-stressful aspects of stepfamily living. This study also attempted to determine if the level of stress for adolescent stepchildren does diminish over time when comparing subjects living in a stepfamily less than two years, two to three years, three to four years, and four to six years. The 63 volunteer subjects responded to a 41-item questionnaire from which the data for this study were obtained. The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation yielded a reliability coefficient of .89 between the test and retest. The questionnaire items represented 12 areas suggested as stressful by the current literature. These areas were: (1) discipline; (2) biological parent elsewhere; (3) compounded loss; (4) parent's and stepparent's understanding of the stepchild's feelings about the stepfamily; (5) pseudomutuality; (6) living with one parent before the remarriage; (7) unrealistic expectations; (8) divided loyalty; (9) family constellation; (10) desire for natural parents to reunite; (11) member of two households; and (12) social issues.

A mean stress score for each of the 12 categories was computed from the subjects' responses. The possible responses for each question were: (1) 1 = not stressful; (2) 2 = slightly stressful; (3) 3 = somewhat stressful; and (4) 4 = very stressful. The category of discipline (mean stress score = 2.52) had the highest mean stress

score of the 12 categories. The category pertaining to social issues (mean stress score = 1.50) had the lowest mean stress score of the 12 categories.

Frequency counts were also computed for the following demographic data: (1) present age of the subjects; (2) sex; (3) the age at which the subjects became members of a stepfamily; (4) the number of years that the subjects had lived in a stepfamily; (5) the number of years that the subjects have lived with one parent prior to the remarriage; (6) the reason for the dissolution of the nuclear family; (7) the presence of stepsiblings; (8) the presence of half siblings; and (9) the presence of a stepmother or stepfather.

This study attempted to measure stress that adolescent stepchildren experience as a result of stepfamily living. One stress experienced by the subjects was computed to be just above "slightly stressful" (overall mean stress score = 2.21).

This study also attempted to determine if the stress for adolescent stepchildren does diminish over time spent in the stepfamily. The results of this study indicate that those subjects living in a stepfamily two to three years experienced more stress (mean stress score = 2.49) than those subjects living in a stepfamily zero to two years (mean stress score = 1.96).

This study also attempted to ascertain if those subjects who had spent a longer period of time with a single parent before the remarriage experienced more stress in stepfamily living. The results indicate that those subjects who had lived nine years or more with a single parent experienced the least amount of stress

(mean stress score = 1.63). Those subjects who had lived zero to three years with a single parent experienced the highest amount of stress (mean stress score = 2.27).

One filler item, "Feeling that your opinion as a teenager is not taken seriously" (mean stress score = 2.87) received the highest mean stress score of the 41 items on the questionnaire. The implications of the study suggest that stepfamily living may not be particularly stressful for adolescent stepchildren. Much of the stress experienced by adolescent stepchildren may be a result of their struggle through the developmental stage of adolescence.

VITA

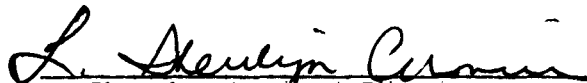
JoAnna Strother
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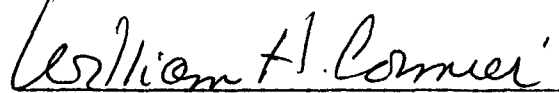
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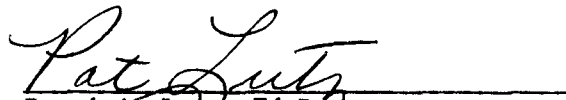
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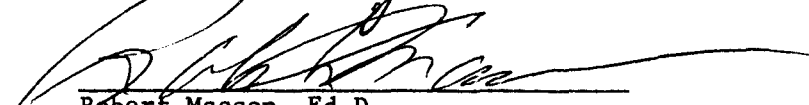
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Morgantown, West Virginia
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APPROVAL OF EXAMINING COMMITTEE

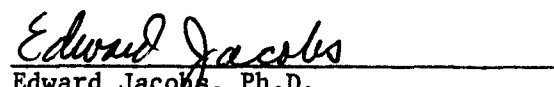

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May 5, 1981
Date


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