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Weekend Warriors: Autonomy-Connection, Openness-Closedness, and Coping Strategies of Marital Partners in Nonresidential Stepfamilies

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Abstract

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Keywords

Relational Dialectics Theory, Content Analysis, Dialectical Tensions, Stepfamily, Nonresidential, and Marital Partners

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Introduction

Cinderella is a fairytale about an innocent girl who suffers at the hands of her cruel stepmother. In contrast, the television show *The Brady Bunch*, a sitcom originally aired on ABC from 1969 to 1974 and run in syndication as reruns since its cancellation (Winans, 2008), depicts a blissfully happy blended stepfamily with six children able to solve any type of problem together. These examples portray extreme stepfamily situations; however, a real life stepfamily exists in a variety of structures, is characterized by numerous interpersonal tensions, and is not always easy to describe or understand.

A stepfamily is created by a marriage into which either one or both spouses bring at least one child from a previous relationship (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). The number of stepfamilies in the United States has been steadily increasing. According to the United States Bureau of Census, 1,300 new stepfamilies form every day, and over 50% of United States families are remarried or re-coupled (Lofas, 2008). The average marriage in America lasts 7 years, and one out of two marriages ends in divorce, with 75% choosing remarriage (Berger, 1998). Likewise, over 40% of marriages in 2001 in England and Wales were remarriages (Pacey, 2005). Sweden leads the world divorce rate with 54.9% of new marriages ending in divorce (Americans for Divorce Reform, 2002). However, step relationships fail at the rate of two out of three, usually because of disagreement between the partners in the couple regarding the children (Lofas).

Stepfamilies have existed throughout history. Remarriage has typically been considered an acceptable solution to the loss of a spouse. The new spouse replaced the deceased parent, allowing the bereaved family to move forward as a completed family unit (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). At the beginning of the 20th century, approximately one-fourth of all children in Western European and North American societies were members of a stepfamily (Berger, 1998). Today most stepfamilies form after divorce, resulting in the presence of a living nonresidential biological parent (Cohn, 2003). The new family structure created with additional stepparents is much more complex than the new family structure created with a replacement parent, possibly leading to additional problems (Ganong & Coleman).

Nonresidential parents face many challenges when trying to stay connected to their children, including creating a comfortable second home for their children and establishing a working relationship with the custodial parent. The nonresidential parent is also faced with the task of carving out a new parental role. When the nonresidential parent is not able to physically interact with his or her children on a daily basis, he or she may feel emotionally disconnected (Frieman, 2003).

Using a relational dialectics theoretical lens, one can see that relational life is characterized by ongoing tensions between contradictory desires. Individuals are not always able to resolve contradictions; however, they are able to manage the tensions through coordinated talk, allowing the relationship to survive (Baxter, 2004; Turner, 2003). Marital partners face internal and external dialectical tensions (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). In regard to stepfamilies, researchers have stressed the need to move the focus beyond the residential stepfamily household to include the nonresidential parents and other nonresidential family members (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). Researchers are beginning to focus on how stepfamily members manage dialectical tensions during interactions with nonresidential parents (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006); however, this line of research has not been extensive.

Stepfamilies are complex, fascinating, and frustrating. Although research regarding stepfamilies has increased over the past two decades, many unanswered questions remain concerning the wide variety of stepfamily relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), specifically the often overlooked adult nonresidential stepfamily members. As a smaller section of an unpublished thesis (DeGreeff, 2006) examining the six dialectical tensions and related coping strategies of nonresidential stepfamily marital partners, the researchers utilized the thesis data focusing on the two dialectical tensions of autonomy-connection and openness-closedness (Werner & Baxter, 1994) along with coping strategies utilized to manage these tensions. Autonomy-connection and openness-closedness were the two most commonly reported tensions experienced by participants in the original thesis study. Additionally, Baxter (1990) reported these two tensions as predominant.

The purpose of this research is to offer a glimpse into the relationship tensions experienced by adult members of nonresidential stepfamily units, in order to increase understanding of communication in these relationships. This study is beneficial because it offers additional understanding of the nonresidential stepfamily process along with knowledge about the roles nonresidential stepfamily members create and adopt within the family and within society. Examining the dialectical tensions and coping strategies used by marital partners in nonresidential stepfamilies can help provide insight into this type

of family relationship for stepfamily researchers and professionals working with stepfamilies. In addition, this information can be useful to helping stepfamilies achieve success when creating and maintaining the new family unit.

Literature Review

In order to gain a greater understanding about how the research questions for this study were developed, an overview of the related literature is presented. First, a definition of stepfamilies is presented. Next, stepfamily relationships are discussed followed by an overview of the nonresidential stepfamily situations. Finally, relational dialectical theory is reviewed.

Definition of a Stepfamily

Stepfamilies are complicated family structures made up of people who are intertwined by a variety of family roles. One out of two marriages ends in divorce, with 75% of divorcees getting remarried. Fifty percent of children under the age of 13 live with one biological parent and their partner (Lofas, 2008). Children of stepfamilies often belong to two households containing several parental subsystems, which include the subsystems of the biological parents, the parental subsystem within the stepfamily consisting of the biological parent and the stepparent, the biological parent and the stepparent of the same gender (i.e., biological father and stepfather, biological mother and stepmother), and various combinations of complex stepfamilies involving multiple marriages (Berger, 1998).

Stepfamilies are complex and unique compared to intact biological family units. A stepfamily is created when either one or both partners has at least one child from a previous relationship (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). A marriage can create a simple stepfamily or a compound stepfamily. A simple stepfamily is created when only one spouse brings children from a previous relationship. A compound stepfamily is created when both partners bring a child or children from a previous relationship. The children can be living with the remarried family full-time or reside in a joint custody situation, dividing their time between their mother's residence and their father's residence (Berger, 1998). Whereas stepfamilies are recognized by common law in some locales, and while others may choose to cohabitate in a committed relationship, for the purposes of this study, the focus is on married partners, primarily due to ease of data collection.

Stepfamily Relationships

New family relationships created by the formation of a stepfamily can be ambiguous. According to a study by Cissna, Cox, and Bochner (1990), managing the dialectic of marital versus parental relationships involves two tasks associated with relationship development in the stepfamily. The first task is to establish the solidarity of the marriage relationship in the minds of the children. The second task is to establish parental authority, mainly the credibility of the stepparent.

Unlike the traditional nuclear family in which the husband-wife bond is typically well established before the competing parent-child bond is created, the parent-child bond

in the step relationship pre-dates the marital bond. As a result, stepfamilies are more susceptible to marital and parental conflict (Broderick, 1993). "The marriage is the freely chosen relationship, but it is not the original one. Simply by being present, the children from a previous marriage can threaten the new marriage" (Cissna et al., p. 51).

Norms regarding parental responsibility for children are more complicated following remarriage. Historically, remarriage followed the death of a spouse. A stepparent was considered a replacement for the deceased parent and expected to assume that parent's role and obligations. Today divorce commonly precedes remarriage, making stepparents additional parental figures rather than replacements. Parental responsibilities and obligations are less clear. The stepparent may fulfill no parental responsibilities, share responsibilities with the nonresidential parent, or assume all the expected obligations of a parent (Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

Developing relationships with all members of the newly created stepfamily can be difficult and may require a considerable amount of time. Bray and Kelly (1998) state the new husband and wife must decide what kind of stepparent/stepchild relationship they want to nurture within the stepfamily. For example, do they wish to develop a close, intimate bond or simply establish a friendship? Couples who fail to consider the type of relationship desired and rushed into the stepfamily setting tend to experience conflict among the family members (Bray & Kelly).

Adults typically consider remarriage to be an opportunity to create a new family after the shattering experience of a death, divorce, or failed relationship. Children, on the other hand, may be upset because the remarriage destroys the child's wish that their parents will get back together (Israeloff, 2003). Divorced parents may also become involved in a triangulation with one or more of their children by involving the child in their conflict. A child may exploit the lack of teamwork between the divorced parents to gain power. Triangulation contributes to the higher re-divorce rate among couples that remarry (Mills, 1988).

Nonresidential Stepfamilies

There is less research on nonresidential parents than on residential parents. Prior research indicated contact with the nonresidential parent declined rapidly over the first 2 years following a divorce. Some parents found intermittent parenting and lack of control over their children's lives painful and simply withdrew. Many nonresidential fathers became either more permissive and indulgent with the children or became disengaged in the lives or their children (Popenoe, 1994). The classic complaints about nonresidential fathers usually include references to not assuming any real parental responsibilities and simply acting as "Disneyland Dads," engaging mostly in social and recreational activities with their children (Furstenberg & Spanier, 1987).

Nonresidential parents and children face many challenges and barriers in their relationship. Visitation schedules make it difficult for the nonresidential parent to be a moral developer, disciplinarian, teacher, caretaker, or protector of the children (Rollie, 2006). The nonresidential parent often feels the need to "catch up" during visitation, usually feels he or she has not had enough time with the children, and generally feels guilty. However, the person who may have the most difficulty dealing with the relationship between the nonresidential parent and his or her children is the stepparent.

Stepmothers have reported feeling ignored, left out, or treated like a maid when the children visit (Lofas, 2008). A stepfather would likely experience similar feelings.

Nonresidential stepparents face the difficulty of a parental remarriage and an economic remarriage. The stepparent must adjust to his or her spouse's children on weekends, holidays, vacations, or other visitation times. He or she also must deal with the economic responsibilities of alimony and child support obligations. Knox and Zusman (2001) found second wives are often irritated by the fact that they must work to help support a woman who once lived with their husband. Issues related to stepchildren, money, and ex-wives have been related to second wives reporting less marital happiness and wishing they had not married (Knox & Zusman).

Relational Dialectical Theory

Researchers have utilized relational dialectical theory to gain insight into a variety of interpersonal relationships. More specifically, the theory explains the contradictory forces relational partners face. Influenced by Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic perspective, Baxter, along with others, has conducted extensive research on relational dialectics and internal and external dialectical contradictions (Werner & Baxter, 1994). "From the perspective of relational dialectics, social life exists in and through people's communicative practices, by which people give voice to multiple opposing tendencies" (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 4).

It is reasonable to assume marital partners in nonresidential stepfamily settings experience dialectical tensions related to the marital relationship and the stepfamily relationship. Werner and Baxter (1994) outlined six clusters of internal and external dialectical contradictions present in interpersonal relationships. Based on the results of a previous study conducted by the primary researcher (DeGreeff, 2006), the two most common clusters of contradictions reported were the internal contradictions of Integration-Separation and Expression-Nonexpression (Werner & Baxter), which are the focus of this study. The first cluster is the internal Integration-Separation contradiction of autonomy-connection, which links needs for both partner independence and autonomy and for partner connection or interdependence in the relationship (Werner & Baxter). Autonomy-connection is the contradiction between the "me" and "we" of a relationship. Couples struggle with the need to spend time together and the need to be alone (Pawlowski, 1998).

The second cluster of contradictions considered in this study is Werner and Baxter's (1994) Internal Expression-Nonexpression contradiction of openness-closedness, which is the dilemma of forthrightness and discretion. Intimacy is built on open and honest disclosure. However, it also involves the right to individual privacy and the responsibility to protect another from being hurt by excessive honesty (Werner & Baxter).

Werner and Baxter (1994) grouped Baxter's (1988) six fundamental coping responses of the dialectical coping model into four main management strategies. These four basic types include selection, cyclic alternation or segmentation, moderation or disqualification, and reframing. Selection refers to people making a choice between the opposites, choosing one need and minimizing, devaluing, or ignoring the other. Cyclic

alternation or segmentation refers to couples responding to contradictory demands by seeking to fulfill each demand separately. Moderation or disqualification occurs when couples respond to both dialectical demands at once. Moderation involves compromise by both parties fulfilling each dialectical pole in part. Disqualification relies on ambiguity and indirectness to give the impression that both dialectical demands are being met. Finally, Reframing involves transforming the dialectic so that it no longer seems to contain an opposition (Werner & Baxter). Focusing on the dialectical tensions of autonomy-connection and openness-closedness, along with the coping strategies utilized by marital partners in nonresidential stepfamily marital relationships, is a first step to identifying the significance of the nonresidential stepfamily's role within the entire stepfamily unit.

Research related to stepfamilies has increased over the past two decades; however, due to the complexity of stepfamily relationships, much more needs to be examined (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). With the exception of two recent studies, examining nonresidential parent/child relationships (see Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Rollie, 2006), little research has been conducted regarding nonresidential stepfamily communication. People in these relationships experience additional challenges related to visitation schedules and temporary living arrangements (Rollie), making this stepfamily arrangement an area ripe for exploration. Anchored in the conceptual framework of relational dialectical theory and the notion that researchers need to explore relational dialectics with a broader range of couples, including couples beginning second or subsequent marriages, the following research questions were put forth in an attempt to increase awareness and understanding of the relationship tensions faced by the often overlooked nonresidential adult stepfamily members.

RQ 1: How are the internal relational dialectical tensions of autonomy-connection and openness-closedness experienced by marital partners within the nonresidential relationship?

RQ 2: What coping strategies do marital partners employ when managing the dialectical tensions present within the nonresidential relationship?

Role of the Researcher

As an interpretative family researcher and a stepmother, the first researcher has a strong interest in increasing understanding of the challenges experienced by individuals and couples in a usually ignored family relationship. Most attention and research related to stepfamily relationships has examined the residential family and/or the relationship between the stepparents and stepchildren (i.e., Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Cissna et al., 1990; Rollie, 2006). Less research has been done examining the stepfamily marital relationship, specifically the nonresidential marital relationship. By interviewing both marital partners together and separately, the first author hoped to collect as accurate and complete descriptions as possible of the tensions experienced by the individuals, and to discover how they coped with the tensions.

As the advisor and mentor of the first author, the second author provided expert guidance and assistance with manuscript preparation. She studies fast-paced lifestyles as

they relate to family and interpersonal relationships. With her experience in conducting qualitative research, she provided guidance in coding and methodological issues.

Methodology

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained from South Dakota State University before conducting any research. All rules and regulations of the human subjects review committee were adhered to for this research study. Each participant received an informed consent form and was assured complete confidentiality. After participants reviewed and signed the consent form, an audiotape interview was conducted.

Qualitative Inquiry

In-depth qualitative interviews were used to gather data related to the dialectical tensions experienced and coping strategies utilized by nonresidential stepfamily marital partners. According to Keyton (2006), interviews are a practical qualitative method used to discover how people think and feel about their communication practices. Field interviewing is a semi-directed form of conversation with the goal of discovering the participant's point of view.

The interview guide for this study included questions about the dialectical tensions experienced within the marital couple relationship and the coping strategies utilized to deal with these tensions. The questions followed a funnel format beginning with general topics and then moving to more specific. Questions were included which allowed the participants to tell their story using an open-ended format (Keyton, 2006).

Research Participants

Participants for this study were restricted to individuals who were currently in a marriage consisting of one partner bringing a child or children into the marriage from a previous relationship with both biological parents living. Each stepfamily had to meet three criteria in order to participate in the study. First, the children from the previous relationship, based on either court order or parental agreement, had to reside a majority of the time in the home of the other biological parent. This criterion was established to ensure the nonresidential stepfamily residence was indeed nonresidential and not viewed as the primary stepfamily residence. Second, the participating couple must have been married at least 2 years, allowing some progress at reorganization and family stability to be made (McGoldrick & Carter, 1980). This criterion was set to ensure that the honeymoon phase of the marriage was over, and both marital partners had the opportunity to fully experience possible relationships tensions that may have emerged related to the stepfamily situation. Third, at least one child brought into the remarriage relationship must have been school-aged. Very young children and adult offspring adjust more quickly and easily to a new marriage than school-age children, causing less re-organizational dilemma (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1974). This final criterion was established based upon previous research (e.g., Wallerstein & Kelly) along with the first author's personal experiences as a stepchild and with her own stepchildren. Very young children

appear to be less aware of the differences between parents and stepparents than school-aged children. Likewise, emancipated adult children do not usually reside in the home of either parent.

The participants of the study were selected using convenience and snowball sampling (Keyton, 2006). Names of participants were generated by researcher inquiry with community members and flyers posted in southwestern Minnesota communities and eastern South Dakota communities. Based on the principles of snowball sampling, as participants were interviewed, they were asked to think of any other possible participants and to have them contact the primary researcher. This technique helped the primary researcher find willing research participants she would not have otherwise have had the opportunity to meet. This technique also helped to establish rapport between the researcher and the research participants based upon the common relationship with the participants suggesting the referral.

The primary researcher gathered data for this project by conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with five marital couples, resulting in 10 research participants. This number of interviews was determined by the researcher to be sufficient, as the goal of the research study was to look for evidence of dialectical tensions and coping strategies, and not necessarily to achieve saturation. Also, many current interview studies tend to collect "around 15 interviews plus or minus 10" (Kvale, 1996, p. 102). The five couple participants were from four small communities located across southwest Minnesota. Couples had been married between 2 ½ and 7 years. Three couples had two nonresidential children and two couples had one nonresidential child. All nonresidential children ranged in age from 12 to 18.

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of three interviews per couple. Digital audio interview recordings were downloaded onto a personal laptop computer. Recordings were transcribed by the primary researcher for the purpose of analysis, resulting in 96 pages of single-spaced typed text. Personally doing the transcription allowed the researcher to become more intimate with the data, leading to a greater level of familiarity (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002). Also, during the process of transcription, the primary researcher utilized the time to develop ideas while noticing potential themes.

In order to establish rapport with the interviewees, the interviewer did disclose the fact that she, too, is a part of a stepfamily, both as an adult onset stepchild and as a stepmother. Frey, Botan, and Kreps (2000) noted the way respondents view the interviewer may affect what they say; researchers should therefore frequently assure that interviewers are similar in crucial ways to the interviewees.

In order to understand the experiences of the participants, it is best to conduct the interview in a natural setting (Frey et al., 2000). Conducting the interviews in settings comfortable and known to the participants creates a more secure interpersonal setting, allowing the interview to develop as a conversation (Keyton, 2006). All but one of the interviews was conducted in the home of the family, keeping the setting natural and the participants comfortable. For one couple this was not feasible; therefore, the researcher and the participants agreed upon an alternative location, which was the home of a friend who could help watch the younger children while the interviews took place.

The first interview was conducted with the marital partners together as a couple. The second and third interviews were conducted with each adult separately, starting with the male partner, followed by the female partner. The researcher determined the order of the interviews. The rationale was that the first interview together would help establish rapport and get both participants in the same mindset. The male participant was randomly chosen to be the second interview, and the pattern was maintained for each set of interviews.

The interview guide for this study included questions about dialectical tensions present in the marital couple relationship, allowing participants to tell their story using an open-ended format (see Appendix A). For example, in the first interview with the couple together, participants were asked to tell their love story including how they met, how long they dated, how many children were involved, and how often they visited. During the individual interviews participants were asked questions about communication with their spouse concerning parenting and discipline issues related to the visiting children and the how they reacted. Questions were also asked about the positive and negative aspects of the children's visits, the relationship with the children, and the relationship with the adult residential stepfamily members (other parent and/or stepparent).

Data Analysis

Following transcription, data analysis was conducted using a three-step process. First, guided by procedures outlined by Semlak, Pearson, Amundson, and Kukak (2008), the primary researcher read through the transcripts to become familiar with content and determine if she could locate the two dialectical tensions under investigation. Next, the two co-researchers, using Pawlowski's (1998, 1999) procedure, independently highlighted passages that reflected the two tensions and coping strategies in the transcripts, resulting in an 88.9% rate of agreement. This coding process, based on locating interview data that reflected the dialectical tensions and coping strategies, focused on finding evidence of the two identified dialectical tensions related to marital partners within their marriage relationship, and also related to their nonresidential stepfamily situation rather than how often the tensions were illustrated. For example, when Emily talked about deciding not to have contact with her stepchild, we coded these comments as an autonomy-connection tension with a selection strategy. Third, once the researchers determined that all statements reflective of the autonomy-connection and openness-closedness tensions and coping strategies were identified, the statements were grouped together and examined for patterns of similarity between and among research participants (Golish & Powell, 2003). Representative participant statements appear below in the results.

As a check on the trustworthiness of the data, Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Creswell (2003) recommend examining several elements. First, a researcher can assess transferability, equivalent to the quantitative measure of external validity, through thick description, as will be illustrated in the next section of this work, and through purposive sampling, in this case through selecting individuals in stepfamily relationships as the participants in the study. In particular, the researchers attempted to represent the voices of the stepfamily participants as closely as possible, which is key to tapping into reported experiences (Golish & Powell, 2003; Kvale, 1996). Second, dependability can be assured

through an inquiry audit (Lincoln & Guba); for this study, an independent communication scholar examined the tensions and coping strategies and agreed that they had been thematized in a correct manner. Finally, confirmability ensures that the researcher was objective, also checked through an inquiry audit in which the independent scholar looks for the researcher's biases. Again, in this case, the outside reader noted no bias.

Results

The dialectical tensions, autonomy-connection and openness-closedness, along with coping strategies utilized to manage the tensions, were identified in the interview transcripts. These tensions and coping strategies were apparent in the participants' relationships with their spouses and in their relationships with their nonresidential children or stepchildren. The findings are arranged to highlight the two dialectical tensions, illustrated by examples of coping strategies to help show how the marital partners in the nonresidential stepfamily experienced and handled these tensions.

Autonomy-Connection

Autonomy-connection, the first tension investigated in this study, associates needs for both partner independence and partner connection in the relationship (Werner & Baxter, 1994). In every interview, when asked about issues of autonomy-connection, each participant reported experiencing this tension. Participants not only experienced the tension in their dyadic relationship as husband and wife, but also felt torn between their loyalties to their children and to their spouse, and experienced tensions in the ex-spouse relationship.

Couple autonomy-connection

As the couples came together some experienced the need for connection even though, based upon previous experience, they were not sure they wanted to develop another intimate relationship. Both Alex and Abby (Couple #1) disclosed that neither one of them was looking for a long-term relationship when they first met. Alex stated, "it was, you know, we're not going to fall in love and this and that, and I fell in love with her and she got pregnant." Abby also disclosed, "it was there almost instantly for me, I didn't want to admit it, but it was."

Alex and Abby had an agreement of autonomy when they started dating, but soon realized that strong feelings of connection were present. In order to cope with the contradiction in feelings, Alex and Abby utilized the coping strategies of cyclic alternation and reframing (Werner & Baxter, 1994). Cyclic alternation refers to couples responding to contradictory relationship demands by seeking to fulfill each separately. Reframing involves transforming the tension so it no longer contains an opposition (Werner & Baxter). They alternated between autonomy and connection as their relationship moved from casual to romantic. Alex justified his attitude change and reasoned:

> I guess I was looking and getting to the point I wanted to settle down, I was 35 years old and thought if I'm going to have a family and settle down I'd better do something about it. (Alex, #1)

Interview participants noted it was especially difficult for the person who was entering the relationship after experiencing a failed relationship to develop a connected bond with the new partner. Emily observed,

> I felt that he still had a lot of feelings for [his ex-wife] and that he pushed me away a lot when we were dating, and if I probably would have been smart I would have left him alone back then and not even continued the relationship. But I kept putting it off as oh, he's just getting over it, he's just getting over it, it'll change, it'll change. (Emily #5)

Eric had been hurt by his ex-wife's departure and expressed feelings of loss, fear, and frustration while working on his new relationship with Emily. He utilized the coping strategy of cyclic alternation, alternating between autonomy and connection, allowing Emily to get close then pushing her away when "things got hectic" (Eric #5).

Emily was frustrated trying to contend with Eric, who was fearful of commitment. She utilized the coping strategies of moderation and reframing (Werner & Baxter, 1994). Moderation involves responding to competing dialectical demands simultaneously. Emily chose to compromise her feelings while waiting for Eric to change. She also transformed the tensions to believe his actions were a part of a normal grieving process. Emily ultimately utilized selection (Werner & Baxter) and demanded Eric chose autonomy or connection. She admitted she was getting to the point where she was "ready to throw in the towel…one night I just kinda blew up at him and then shortly after that he asked me to marry him" (Emily, #5).

On the other hand, some participants expressed little fear in coming together as a couple and choosing connection. They had few reservations, were confident about the choice to be with their partner, and felt the decision was not a difficult one. Chris (Couple #3) recalled, "I'd dated many other women and they drove me nuts, so I knew, that was it, I knew, I could tell with her, I liked [her daughter]; it was just a fit." Chris utilized selection and chose connection mostly because he got along well with his new partner.

Participants with children from a previous relationship illustrated that early relationship connection was not only contingent upon how they felt about the other person, but also on how their relationship partner related to the children involved. The participants with the children from a previous relationship often noted that they were a "package deal;" therefore, they wanted to find someone who was comfortable with the concept of the "instant family." Participants also indicated they had faced difficulties finding a person who could accept the idea of their children. Brian (Couple #2) and Connie (Couple #3) each recalled dating other people in the past who were not a good fit for their children, and each ultimately ended the relationship. Brian disclosed,

> I went with a gal that had five kids…we could have been soul mates, we liked things the same, we did the same, her family had different beliefs than the way I was raised, our kids didn't get along, it's kinda like I want to

find somebody who doesn't have kids so I don't have to worry about blending the kids together. (Brian, #2)

Brian turned down a chance for long-term happiness with his "soul mate" and decided to seek out someone without children so he could avoid stepsibling rivalry. When Brian met Betty, he found she was good with his kids, attractive, intelligent, and they both wanted to end up on a hobby farm. He was therefore able to utilize selection and choose connection.

Connie (Couple #3) articulated she had dated other guys in the past and her daughter "never liked anybody I dated, and she liked Chris from the get go." Although the fact that her daughter liked Chris was important to Connie, it was only one of the qualities she found important in her decision to utilize selection to choose connection with Chris. She recalled how comfortable she felt with him and how easily they could talk. "That was a big thing for me, the communication, because I didn't have that in my first marriage so that was a big plus to me" (Connie, #3).

The only guarantee in a relationship is that it will change (Dainton & Zelley, 2005). Relationships evolve and children age. Despite challenges, four couples acknowledged that even though they had been together for a few years, they still remained connected, both as a couple and as a family. Every couple was aware of the importance of spending time together and made a specific point to accommodate the connection need, even though it required effort. Abby commented that she and Alex enjoy hunting, fishing, and riding four-wheelers together. Chris pointed out that both he and Connie have hectic jobs and are aware of the notion that "if you get caught up in that then all of a sudden you're shutting off your personal time, your personal life, and you gotta leave the line of communication open, and we do" (Connie #2).

On the other hand, Brian and Betty (Couple #2) expressed that they valued their autonomy needs over their connection needs within their relationship. Betty enjoys going to horseshows every weekend during the summer. Brian went with her for a few years, but did not enjoy it and decided he had other things he wanted to do. He noted that they have similarities but "don't need to be locked at the hips to make things work." Brian also revealed,

> She's very independent, she always has been, so spending time alone to her isn't much, but to me, I'm used to having someone around, I like to have people around, it's been an adjustment for me, but I'd rather than, spending time around here wondering if she's pissed, I'm going fishing, see you in a couple of days. (Brian, #2)

Betty has utilized selection, choosing autonomy, while Brian has utilized reframing, transferring the fact that they do not have to be doing things together into a relationship positive.

Stepchild autonomy-connection

The autonomy-connection tensions were not only present between the husbands and wives; they were also present between the stepparent and the stepchildren involved.

The stepparents recalled that tensions were present when attempting to develop a relationship with their partners' children.

Alex (Couple #1) and Donna (Couple #4) remarked that they did not experience any troubles coming together with their stepchildren. Alex recognized that things could have been miserable if he and his stepson had not bonded in a positive way, reflecting,

> if the kid and I were going to buck heads all the time it would cause problems between Abby and I, which I know of a family like that, they're married and they got the one kid that bucks heads all the time and it's causing problems. (Alex, #1)

Alex and his stepson experienced connection, something that does not always occur in step-relationships.

Most participants expressed that there was connection between the stepparent and the stepchildren in the beginning when the relationship was new and the children were younger. However, the relationship became more challenging as time passed; the children grew older and "turned" on the stepparent. Many times the stepparent could trace the change in the relationship to a single event. Once the stepchildren experienced autonomy with their stepparent, the stepparent was unable to regain the connection and ultimately experienced feelings of autonomy also.

Abby recalled that she and her stepdaughter used to get along really well until "a big blowup over the phone one night and it just hasn't been the same since" (Abby, #1). Emily experienced a similar circumstance with her stepchildren, noting, "the kids really appreciated me and everything was going really good until me and [his ex-wife] had a little confrontation one time and ever since then [step-children] have been totally 'I don't have to listen to you" (Emily #5).

Three participating stepmothers were hurt by their stepchildren and made comments regarding choosing autonomy. Abby stated, "as far as I'm concerned it's a done deal. If she doesn't want to accept me that's fine" (Abby, #1). Emily commented, "If they don't want it, I don't want it, I've tried and tried and tried" (Emily, #5). Betty declared, "I'd had enough of her, she lied, she stole… enough… I didn't want to see her, she made me upset just to have her in the house" (Betty, #2). Each participant coped with the change utilizing cyclic alternation, alternating between connection at the beginning of the relationship and autonomy later. They each ultimately utilized selection and reluctantly moved to autonomy within the stepparent/stepchild relationship.

The biological parents also experienced connection tensions related to being torn between maintaining a special relationship with their children and not wanting to alienate their spouses. Brian explained that as a result of being single for several years he was able to dedicate every moment of his visitation time to his children. After he started dating Betty, things changed.

> When she came into the picture, all the time I had for the kids now went to her and they looked at it as 'well you bought her this nice thing and you could have spent that on us', and there is still some of that resentment yet today. (Brian, #2)

Not only did Brian perceive resentment from his children, the animosity between his daughter and his wife has made his life difficult. Brian recalled a specific event during the interview with Betty present that described his frustrations.

> Just a year ago you told me I couldn't have the kids for Christmas…I didn't have them, I even had to meet my daughter somewhere else to give her her gifts for Christmas and that got be a whole challenge…I'm caught in the middle, I got to please two people. (Brian, #2)

Eric expressed feelings very similar to Brian's, explaining,

> It's like being caught between a rock and a hard place there, you know when the kids are down and want to do this and this, but then all of a sudden I've got the other two kids and my wife, it's like being squeezed. (Eric, #5)

Ex-spouse autonomy-connection

Some couples experienced autonomy-connection tensions related to the ex-spouse, causing problems within the relationship between the marital partners and also between the children and the nonresidential stepfamily. Many times the nonresidential stepparent perceived that the ex-spouse wanted to have full control over the actions of the nonresidential parent and the interactions with their children. Betty (Couple #2) explained that Brian's ex-wife played a lot of "mind games" with him and put the kids in the middle. Betty remarked, "I have to give him credit for not doing that, you know he took the sacrifice and he played along with what she demanded, and that's what frustrated the heck out of me" (Betty, #2). Emily (Couple #5) expressed similar feelings recalling how before she started dating Eric, his ex-wife continued to rely on him to help her out whenever she asked, whether it was to fix her car or other miscellaneous handyman work. Once Emily started dating him, things changed, and Eric's ex-wife tried to be more aggressive in overseeing his visitation time with the children. Emily observed,

> when I came into the picture, well, "you shouldn't bring the kids to [town], you're spending time with the kids, not with Emily," I mean it was just the thing that she wanted him yet, but not in her house (Emily, #5).

Both Betty and Emily coped with the tensions utilizing moderation compromising the autonomy-connection tensions remaining connected in their relationship, yet autonomous in their feelings of frustration.

Chris and Connie (Couple #3) experienced a change in circumstance when Connie's daughter turned 16 and her biological father suddenly reappeared after a 9-year absence. Within a few months, Connie's daughter chose to move in with her father. Chris recalled, "as soon as she started seeing her dad, I'm like OK, this is going to cause troubles, and it did. I still think if her dad wasn't involved that she would probably still be here today" (Chris, #3).

Chris indicated that the reappearance of the long-lost biological father into his stepdaughter's life prompted her to force autonomy within the stepfamily. The stepdaughter utilized selection and moved toward autonomy with Chris and Connie, moving into her biological father's home. Before the biological father arrived, the relationship between the stepfather and stepdaughter was marked by connection. It became more autonomous after her biological father's reappearance into her life. Once his stepdaughter moved out, Chris utilized cyclic alternation (Werner & Baxter, 1994), experiencing connection with his stepdaughter during visits and autonomy when she was not in the family's presence.

To summarize, all five of the nonresidential stepfamily couple participants experienced the tension of autonomy-connection. They experienced the tension in their relationship as marital partners and in their relationship with the nonresidential children. Over time, the marital partners experienced evolving autonomy-connection tensions with regard to their marriage and also with regard to their relationship with the children. In response to the second research question, all of the couples in this study used a variety of coping strategies to respond to the autonomy-connection tension.

Openness-Closedness

Openness-closedness, the second major tension investigated in this study, is related to the struggle between being forthright and practicing discretion (Werner & Baxter, 1994). Evidence of openness-closedness tensions was found among all participants. As with autonomy-connection, the tension occurred within the couple, between stepparents, and between the children and stepparents.

Couple openness-closedness

Some of the stepparents disclosed that they experienced negative feelings related to their stepchildren. They struggled with the notion of sharing these feelings with their spouse, the child's parent, who may not want to hear negative things about the children. Alex (Couple #1) disclosed in front of Abby, "I think she is going to get mad at me for saying this, but I think the kids got it too goddam good" (Alex, #1). Alex understood that he would upset Abby with his comment; however, he still utilized selection and experienced openness letting Abby know his true feelings.

In a similar fashion, Betty (Couple #2) expressed her frustrations regarding her stepdaughter to Brian, who did not want to hear or believe anything she had to say regarding his daughter. "I said to him one day, just take your blinders off and see." However, Brian did not react positively to Betty's openness. "Pissed him off. STRESS, stressed right from there, yes, because he wanted to see her for who he wanted her to be, not for who she was" (Betty, #2). Betty felt, as the nonbiased party, that she had a clear vision of her stepdaughter. In her frustration with the relationship, Betty utilized selection by expressing openness, only to find Brian upset with her.

Alex and Betty chose to be open with their feelings regarding their stepchildren. Emily (Couple #5), on the other hand, was more indirect in expressing her feelings to Eric. Emily disclosed feelings of frustration regarding the child support Eric pays because money is tight in their household. She admits sometimes she feels resentful about the

child support because she feels her children have to do without because of his ex-wife. Rather than tell Eric her true feelings, Emily illustrated how she coped with the tensions.

> I don't tell him a lot of that resentful part and stuff because I don't want him to feel bad either, but so I think I let him know other ways, by getting angry towards things like if we're out shopping and the kids want this, they want this, I'm like "we don't have enough for our kids, so why should we spoil extra on your kids when they're down." But then I feel guilty because yes, they're his kids and he should be able to buy them something too and so it's hard. If he asks my opinion I just kinda walk away. (Emily, #5)

Emily utilized selection and disqualification by not saying anything to Eric, but letting him know indirectly some of her feelings.

Stepparent openness-closedness

Stepparents experience a unique set of circumstances regarding the stepchildren. The participants of this study all expressed feelings of deep caring, and even love, for their stepchildren. However, they also were forced to acknowledge that as a stepparent, they were secondary to the biological parents. Because of this delicate relationship, the stepparent participants were sometimes hurt, either intentionally or non-intentionally, by the actions of their stepchildren. Participants described situations that illustrated how circumstances within the stepfamily evolved, and how they ended up with feelings of hurt and betrayal caused by their stepchildren.

Betty (Couple #2) explained when she and Brian first came together as a couple, and early in their marriage, she had every intention of being the best possible stepmother to Brian's children. Regarding Brian's daughter, Betty disclosed, "I did whatever I could, whenever she asked for something I helped her with it, I took her down to get birth control which he [Brian] did not want" (Betty, #2). She indicated that she defended her stepdaughter when Brian found out about the birth control, recalling, "I was like, 'she's going to do it anyway,' but he got very mad about that, but she wanted me to keep it a secret from him, which I did for a long time" (Betty, #2).

Much like Betty, Chris (Couple #3) was able to pinpoint the time period when the relationship with his stepdaughter changed. He experienced feelings of loss when his stepdaughter reunited with her biological father. Chris illustrated his contradictory feelings about his stepdaughter moving out of their home stating,

> I'm not going to downgrade her for what she did, it's still her father, and I'm sure she was torn quite a few years when he didn't have contact with her. There's probably a lot of emotions flowing there yet of 'why didn't he want me.' So I've just kinda been there for her, but yet, she's got her real father, and if she needs my help, I'm there…I just kinda hang back in the weeds and if I'm needed I'm needed. (Chris, #3)

Similarly, Emily (Couple #5) experienced emotional pain delivered by the actions of her stepchildren. She realized she was blindsided and now feels she cannot trust them or communicate openly with them.

> I thought we got along good, but then they turn around and they go tell
> [the ex-wife] other things and I don't know what to trust in them anymore.
> So right now I don't have a lot of strength with communication with them.
> (Emily, #5)

All three stepparents coped with the tensions utilizing cyclic alternation and alternating between openness and closedness throughout the relationship.

Children openness-closedness

When communicating with the children, participants indicated they struggled with what they should disclose and what they should not. Several participants expressed that they were often tempted to tell the children "the truth" about the other parent. Sometimes they resisted the temptation to express their feelings, other times they did not.

Connie explained now that her ex-husband has reconnected with her daughter, even though he only sporadically paid child support during his absence, he has been showering her with his family's money. Connie illustrated her frustration,

> I still bite my lip once in a while when I hear "well, my dad's taking me
> here," sometimes I just want to say 'it's not always about the financial or
> the physical,' but I don't ever "oh, your dad." (Connie, #3)

Connie also remarked that she has held onto the belief that she should not disclose her true feelings about her ex-husband to her daughter because, "no matter what, that's still her dad, even if he wasn't the greatest dad in my opinion, but I know that if I'm going to badmouth him, deep down that probably hurts and affects her" (Connie, #3).

Emily (Couple #5) also expressed how frustrating it was for her to contain her feelings when the kids repeat things their mother has said. She disclosed that she is tempted to set the record straight when she hears Eric's ex-wife has made comments regarding him or spoken negatively about her. Connie also noted that she makes a conscious effort to keep her feelings regarding the children's mother and stepfather to herself because she knows, based upon past experience, her comments will be repeated to Eric's ex-wife.

Doug (Couple #4) explained even though it takes a lot of work to keep from badmouthing his ex-spouse in front the children, it is well worth it. Unlike the other divorced couples of this study, Doug and his ex-wife have an agreement, "me and his mom decided right away that we just weren't going to do that. Nobody badmouths each other in front of him and just none of that happens" (Doug, #4). As a police officer, Doug has witnessed the damages marital conflict can have on a child. He explained,

> Them little kids, they remember all that stuff. When you go, when the
> police officer shows up or whatever, and you call the mom a bitch in front

> of him, and they remember all that stuff, and it's no good for anybody.
> And they'll remember that forever, and you can really traumatize a kid.
> (Doug, #4)

Connie, Emily, and Doug all acknowledged it is difficult to remain silent about their true feelings for the other parent "biting their lip," being "tempted" to speak up, and "that it takes work." Regardless of the difficulties, they all utilized selection choosing closedness.

Although all the participants noted that they attempted to not speak negatively in front of the children, once in a while their frustrations got the best of them. Brian (Couple #2) described how actions by his ex-wife could push Betty's "hot buttons" causing her to explode. Brian also admitted that he, too, was guilty of expressing his feelings to the kids. "I didn't agree with a lot of the stuff that was happening there, and the kids knew it because I would speak my piece and there would be war once in a while." Brian and Betty both utilized selection and experienced openness after attempting closedness.

Eric (Couple #5) admitted that he harbored feelings of animosity toward his children's stepfather. "The guy that she married, I worked with at [my job] for a while, I can't stand him, I couldn't stand him then" (Eric, #5). He illustrated openness when he recalled a time he said something "not so nice," and his son told his mother. As a result, Eric's ex-wife called him and demanded an explanation. Eric told her, "because I can't stand him, and I can't stand some of the stuff he does with my kids" (Eric, #5). Eric utilized selection choosing openness with his children and suffered consequences from his ex-wife.

To summarize, the nonresidential stepfamily participants experienced the tension of openness-closedness expressing (or not expressing) their true feelings about parenting issues, the children, and the ex-spouse. All of the participants utilized the selection coping strategy to deal with the openness-closedness tension. They also utilized cyclic alternation, alternating between openness and closedness at different times throughout the relationship, and moderation to compromise with some openness and some closedness. Therefore, to answer the second research question, the coping strategies of selection, cyclic alternation, and moderation were utilized by the participants to manage the dialectical tension of openness-closedness.

Conclusion

The results of this study revealed that dialectical tensions are prevalent among marital partners of nonresidential stepfamilies and are directly related to the unique feelings that arise due to the many intricacies involved with the nonresidential stepfamily situation. Past research has examined dialectical tensions between romantic partners, marital partners, stepparents, and stepchildren (Baxter, 1990; Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Cissna et al., 1990; Pawlowski, 1998). This study adds to previous research with the examination of dialectical tensions experienced by nonresidential stepfamily marital partners. This type of research is necessary because the nature of the communication and the coping strategies utilized by marital partners play an important role in the success of the marital relationship (Berger, 1998). Research participants offered detailed explanations of the tensions they were experiencing and how they attempted to manage them.

Nonresidential stepfamilies are considered a unique family structure and not always recognized by others as a valid family. Participants of this study expressed feelings of frustration and despair when they became overwhelmed by the difficulties related to their nonresidential children and family structure, believing they were alone. Nonresidential stepfamilies are messy compared with a nuclear family or even a residential stepfamily. The participants in this study revealed the extent of dialectic tensions in family relationships not previously examined. It is possible increased awareness and understanding can lead to greater tolerance and acceptance of nonresidential stepfamilies within our society.

Research participants experienced dialectical tensions in their relationship as marital partners and in their relationship with the nonresidential children. Over time, the marital partners experienced evolving autonomy-connection tensions (Werner & Baxter, 1994), in regard to their marriage and also in regard to their relationship with the children. The passage of time, along with the aging of the children, played a role in this evolution. In the interviews, the participants explained how they used various strategies to cope with the autonomy-connection tensions experienced throughout the life of their relationship, including selection, reframing, and cyclic alternation. Previous research has confirmed the existence of autonomy-connection tensions within romantic relationships (Pawlowski, 1998). This study uniquely demonstrates the fluidity of dialectical tensions and the different ways of coping with them as relationships evolve in nonresidential stepfamilies.

The tensions of openness-closedness (Werner & Baxter, 1994) were often experienced by stepparents struggling with the notion of expressing to their spouse their true feelings about parenting issues, the stepchildren, and the ex-spouse. Biological parents often struggled with telling the kids "the truth" about the ex-spouse/other biological parent, as well as with the custodial parent badmouthing them and/or their new spouse. Participants utilized the various strategies of selection, cyclic alternation, moderation, or disqualification when coping with the tensions related to whether or not they should express their feelings or remain silent.

In regard to stepfamilies, researchers have stressed the need to move the focus beyond the residential stepfamily household to include the nonresidential parents and other nonresidential family members (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). Researchers are beginning to focus on how stepfamily members manage dialectical tensions during interactions with nonresidential parents (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006); however, this line of research has not been extensive.

Limitations of the study included the fact that the participants were interviewed only once and asked to recall experiences related to stepfamily issues. Couples with younger children faced different types of issues than couples with older children. Longitudinal studies could offer insight to the evolving tensions experienced by nonresidential stepfamily members as the children grow from young children to adults.

A second limitation of the study is the results are based on interview data provided by participants who have remained married regardless of the difficulties many have had to overcome. Subsequent marriages end at a higher rate than first marriages (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Including perceptions of nonresidential marital partners whose subsequent marriage failed could offer further insight related the unique tensions associated with this specific stepfamily formation.

Further research should be carried out to build upon the findings of this study and others that are beginning to examine nonresidential stepfamily circumstances. This line of research could also benefit with insight offered from the perspective of the children involved with the nonresidential stepfamily. More research should also include a focus on the nontraditional nonresidential stepfamilies, including cohabitating couples and gay couples. This study concentrated on couples who were married; however, each couple noted that they had lived together prior to getting married. Other couples were turned away from this study because they were not married, but had been cohabitating for many years.

Results of this study will benefit researchers, communication instructors, counselors, and stepfamilies, helping them become more aware of the marital tensions and coping strategies utilized within nonresidential stepfamilies. Understanding the unique tensions and circumstances present in nonresidential stepfamilies can help increase the chances of success within the marriage and within the nonresidential stepfamily, helping maintain the familial bond with the nonresidential children.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Orientation:
1. Briefly explain the purpose of the study, why this study is important, and what we hope to discover
2. Give assurance that personal anonymity will be preserved in the reporting
3. Secure permission to use tape recorder
4. Explain results of the completed study will be available upon request

Questions:
First interview administered to the couple together.
1. Tell me your story.
   a. How long have you been married?
   b. How did you meet?
   c. How long did you date before getting married?
   d. How many children do you have (yours, mine, ours)?
   e. Where do the children reside?

      f.   How often do the children visit?
2. As a couple, what do you feel were your most important communication problems to overcome regarding the stepfamily?
3. As a couple, what do you feel were other important obstacles you needed to overcome in organizing the stepfamily?
4. What problems (if any) do you feel you experienced as you came together as a couple with the children to identify your group as a new family?
      a.   What do the kids call you?
      b.   What strategies and tactics did you use to overcome the family identification and relationship problems?
5. What people or groups were important to you as you formed your stepfamily?
6. What do feel are the strengths of your stepfamily?
7. What do feel are the challenges faced by your stepfamily?

Second interview administered to each adult separately.
1. How long have you been married?
      a.   How did you meet?
      b.   What attracted you to him/her?
      c.   How long did you date before getting married?
      d.   What was the main thing about him/ her that made you know he/she was "the one" and it was time to get married?
2. (If applicable) How long were you married to your former spouse?
      a.   How many children did you have before your current marriage?
      b.   Describe your marital and parental relationship.
      c.   How did you communicate with your ex-partner about parenting issues while you were married?
3. How would you describe your communication with your current spouse?
      a.   Describe communication regarding parenting and discipline issues.
          i.   Do you disagree? How do you handle it?
      b.   Describe communication regarding finances.
          i.   Child support?
          ii.   Spending money?
          iii.   Gifts?
4. Tell me about your experiences with visitation routines.
      a.   Describe a typical visit.
      b.   Describe the positive aspects of the visits.
      c.   Describe the challenges associated with the visits.
          i.   How do the kids behave and act toward the step parent?
5. How would you describe your communication relationship with the children?
      a.   Describe how your communication patterns with the children developed.
      b.   Describe the strengths and challenges related to communication with the children.
          i.   Is there tension related to being careful about what you say around the kids?

        ii. During the visit, does the intensity of tension for the children, you, and your spouse change?

6. What advice would you have to offer a new couple organizing a stepfamily?
7. What do you feel are the strengths in your marriage communication?
8. What are the challenges related to your marriage communication?

Conclusion/ Debriefing:

1. Summarize main points of the interaction.
2. Summarize any new or interesting information gained from this particular interview.
3. Explain the purpose of the study, why this study is important, and what we hope to discover.
4. Ask if there is anything else they would like to add.
5. Ask if there are any questions – if yes answer them.

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