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Paths to Positivity: Relational Trajectories and Interaction in Positive Stepparent-Stepchild Dyads

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Abstract

Stepfamilies are inherently complex family systems, marked by change, flexible boundaries, and early conflict. But the developmental pathways by which long-term stepparent relationships become positive require more study. We interviewed 38 stepchildren who had reached adulthood, to understand how their relationships with a stepparent became positive. Four relational trajectories defined these positive relationships: punctuated, consistent positive, progressive incline, and modulated turbulent. Distinctive communicative practices were associated with each trajectory, such as communicating assurances, “siding,” or revelations of character. In addition, the trajectories shared three common processes: responsiveness to

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stepchild vulnerability, stepparent “adding value” to the family, and maturation/reframing of the past. Findings support the existence of multiple pathways to positivity and suggest that major fluctuations are experienced along the way. Findings are interpreted in light of existing research on stepfamily development and Afifi’s theory of resilience and relational load. Recommendations are offered for stepfamilies and professionals who serve them.

Stepfamilies are inherently complex family systems, marked by change and flexible boundaries. They are also pervasive, as more than 40% of adults have a step-relation (Pew Research Center, 2011). Stepfamilies are discursive constructions; relationships are made and remade in interaction (Baxter, 2014; Braithwaite & Suter, in press). In some respects, all families are what Galvin (2006) labeled “discourse dependent,” meaning they co-create their family culture and roles in interaction. However, families lacking relational models are particularly reliant on communication to define and enact family bonds (Baxter, 2014; Galvin, 2006).

Although scholars, clinicians, and popular media tend to focus on the challenges stepfamilies face (see Ganong & Coleman, 2017), an increasing number of scholars have called for a focus on positive stepfamilies (e.g., Waldron et al., 2018), part of a general shift toward research on positive interpersonal communication (e.g., Socha & Pitts, 2012) and human behavior more generally (e.g., Peterson, 2006). Building on scholars’ work on positive stepfamily relationships (e.g., Braithwaite et al., 2018; Oliver-Blackburn, 2019), we sought to understand positive stepfamily interaction and relationships from the perspective of adult stepchildren who are old enough to reflect on the development of their stepfamily. The central purpose of this study was to identify the developmental patterns, communication practices, and varying paths to positivity stepchildren associated with these relationships.

Developmental trajectories of stepfamily life

Although it is most common for researchers to study stepfamilies as snapshots at one point in time, some scholars have opted for a developmental approach to understanding both the qualitative and

quantitative evolution of these relationships over time (Mongeau et al., 2022). Some scholars represent stepfamily development via chronological stage models (e.g., L. H. Ganong et al., 2011; Papernow, 2013) and while these models provide insights into the stepfamily experience, they can oversimplify the complexity of the families, minimize the up and down development of change across time, and fail to capture the multiplicity of their developmental routes (Baxter et al., 1999; Sahlstein Parcell, 2013). In contrast, a number of scholars have focused on relational turning points in stepfamilies, wherein relational parties focus on pivotal events, positive or negative, that brought about or reflected important relational changes (e.g., Baxter et al., 1999; Braithwaite et al., 2018; Graham, 1997; Nuru & Wang, 2014).

Relational turning points

Turning point analysis focuses on events that represent “sudden and dramatic relational breakthroughs . . . [or] small, patterned, relational changes . . . that depict relational development as slow and gradual” (Mongeau et al., 2022, p. 332). Starting with Bolton (1961), scholars have found turning points (TP) analysis a fruitful methodology for understanding transformation in various relationship types, including dating (L. Baxter & Bullis, 1986), mate selection (Huston et al., 1981), spousal partnerships during military deployment (Sahlstein Parcell & Maguire, 2014), grandparent–grandchild relationships (Bangerter & Waldron, 2014), and adult children and parents (Golish, 2000). Earlier scholars identified TPs in married (e.g., Baxter et al., 1999; Graham, 1997) and cohabiting stepfamilies (Nuru & Wang, 2014). Recent scholars have targeted specific relationships within the stepfamily, such as step and half-siblings (Oliver, Oliver-Blackburn, 2019, November 13-17) and between stepchildren and stepparents (e.g., Braithwaite et al., 2018; Oliver-Blackburn et al., 2021). For example, Braithwaite et al. (2018) interviewed adult children who reported a positive relationship with a stepparent, identifying 15 TP types, including episodes of quality time, conflict and disagreements, and prosocial actions by the stepparent.

Comparing studies, we learned that although some TPs are common across stepfamilies (e.g., rituals, conflict, changes in household

composition; Baxter et al., 1999), other TPs are specific to a particular role or relationship, for example, remarriage of a former spouse (Graham, 1997) or a stepparent's role change from friend to parent (Oliver-Blackburn et al., 2021). Common TPs across stepfamilies are helpful to understand the shared experiences and critical events that many stepfamilies face. In addition to identifying shared events of family development, TP studies help scholars track changes along specific relational dimensions, for example, positivity, closeness, and togetherness, and to understand the valence of TPs over time, creating a more textured view of events and interactions that make stepfamily life more or less functional and satisfying.

Relational trajectories

While existing TP studies are particularly useful in understanding critical relational events, scholars recognized that TPs occur in different patterns over the relational lifespan that may serve as catalysts for developmental pathways. A smaller number of scholars have examined relational trajectories, tracking and describing patterns of relational change over time in which turning points are embedded (Sahlstein Parcell, 2013), for example, in stepfamilies (Baxter et al., 1999) or couples during military deployment (Sahlstein Parcell & Maguire, 2014).

Sahlstein Parcell (2013) argued for the usefulness of trajectory scholarship as researchers move their work away from linear patterns of relational development and adopt the perspective that “change does not have to occur in predetermined ways; analyses of change should identify varied patterns” (p. 168). Trajectory researchers use TPs as a starting point, rather than an endpoint, focusing on the arrangement of TPs in different developmental patterns. For instance, Baxter et al. (1999) developed a model of five relational trajectories over the first four years of developing stepfamilies, examining pathways through which members of new stepfamilies families come to “feel like a family” (p. 297). *Accelerated* trajectories showed rapid and sustained movement to family identity, *prolonged* trajectories showed gradual increases over time, and in *stagnating* trajectories reports of feeling like a family started at

low levels and never progressed. In in *declining* trajectories, feeling like a family started strong but receded over the four years and high amplitude paths assumed a chaotic up-and-down pattern of feeling like a family. These early findings were important both theoretically and practically as they demonstrated that whether they ended up with high or low levels of family cohesion, stepfamilies had the potential to evolve along multiple paths (Braithwaite et al., 2001).

Dun and Sears (2017) stressed that relational trajectories are particularly useful to understand the natural ebb and flow of relational experience. Sahlstein Parcell (2013) affirmed this idea, reviewing nine studies that supported what she called “metapatterns of family movement” (p. 172), noting that relationship change need not be linear, tracking upward relational development and then dissolving downward. By examining how relationships change over different TPs, researchers can learn how stepfamilies interpret, reorient, and navigate within the sometimes-choppy waves of family development, resisting trying to find an optimal path of stepfamily development (Braithwaite et al., 2001).

Finally, while identifying trajectory patterns is helpful, researchers can advance their understanding of stepfamily development by identifying communication practices that shape trajectories of relational stability and those that function as catalysts for developmental change. This leads us to ask which kinds of interaction results in precipitous drops in perceptions of relational positivity, helps members recover from those drops, accelerates positive trends, or stabilizes turbulent trajectories. Along these lines, Braithwaite et al. (2001) engaged in a follow-up analysis of the Baxter et al. (1999) five stepfamily trajectory types and identified three communication processes that enacted different stepfamily experiences: solidarity, boundary management, and adaptation. More recent scholars suggest other forms of communication that might reshape trajectories, such as such as members mutually (re) calibrating investments of relational resources (Afifi, 2018) or stepparents (re)balancing the role of protector and friend (Oliver-Blackburn et al., 2021). In this present investigation, we examined events and communication that stepchildren perceive as leading to positive relational outcomes in the long run.

Interaction in positive stepchild-stepparent relationships

Our focus is on the stepchild-stepparent relationship, perhaps the most complex and influential of stepfamily bonds (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Scholars have chronicled challenges stepparents and stepchildren face, especially stressors and ambiguity of the stepparent role (Ganong et al., 1999; Schrodtt, 2006; Schrodtt et al., 2008). For the married or cohabiting couple, decisions about whether the stepparent should function as a parent or a friend to stepchildren is an important decision, often associated with relational struggle, with most prescriptions favoring the latter (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Ganong et al., 2019; Speer & Trees, 2007).

Thoughts about the stepparent role are being reevaluated as more scholars study the potentially unique discursive and developmental features of *positive* stepparenting bonds. For example, researchers have examined communication of affinity by stepparents (Ganong et al., 2019; Speer & Trees, 2007) and stepsiblings (Ganong et al., 2021), finding it crucial in helping positive relationships grow over time. Ganong et al. (1999) reported that stepparents in strong relationships worked at establishing closeness and continued their efforts across the years. Waldron et al. (2018) studied the role of forgiveness in stepchildren's descriptions of positive relationships, finding that implicit or explicit forgiveness was reported in 76% of the families represented. These scholars concluded that the practice of forgiveness and narratives about past forgiveness helped cultivate positive bonds. These findings provide encouragement to attend to how success (or failure) of efforts to repair emotional hurts of the past may influence stepfamily developmental trajectories.

Oliver-Blackburn et al. (2021) studied the perspective of stepparents in overall positive stepfamilies and identified two unique processes: (a) functioning as a parent rather than a friend and (b) communicating support for the stepchild by offering both protection and availability. It appeared that functioning more as a parent than a friend may be a catalyst for positive relational development in certain stepfamilies, such as those with younger children. The authors observed that certain TPs previously associated with stepfamily development offered opportunities to enact this parenting function, including stepparents' initiating spending quality time together and their

constructive responses during conflict. With this study of stepparent perspectives in mind, we explored developmental trajectories from the perspectives of adult stepchildren, recognizing that their perspectives are likely to vary from younger children. Such factors as maturation, longer history with stepfamily, and opportunities for early conflicts to be resolved (or to simmer and build) are all justification for studying older stepchildren more closely.

Purpose of the study

While extant work on stepfamily TPs and trajectories provides an insightful starting point (e.g., Baxter et al., 1999; Braithwaite et al., 2018), these studies leave important issues unaddressed. First, the foundational work of Baxter et al. (1999) focused solely on the first four years of stepfamily life, reflecting early theorizing that it took four years for stepfamilies to stabilize. It has since become clear that stepfamily life can be positive or turbulent for many years. Braithwaite et al. (2018) reported that some TPs occurred much later in the family lifespan, as, for example, a nonresidential parent died, stepchildren started their own families, or family members rallied to support an ill or distressed member. In other words, as the lifespan evolves, stepfamilies may discover new opportunities to cohere or come apart.

Second, although the focus on family identity (i.e., feeling like a family) was justified, Baxter et al. (1999) and subsequent scholars have largely failed to consider the valence of family identity. Presumably, feeling like a family can be either positive or negative, or both to some degree. Moreover, their study design had primed participants to draw on stereotypical notions of family life, one grounded in feeling like a “typical” or even “normal” family. An alternative approach, one adopted in this study, was to track the degree that members felt positively about their family experience, by examining the communication patterns and events that members associated with increases and decreases in positivity.

Third, although many stepfamilies thrive, the various paths to positivity are not well-documented, particularly beyond the early years of stepfamily life. It would be helpful to know if pathways tend to be rocky or smooth and how they might change over the years. We

believe this will be useful information for stepfamilies early in the process and can help them forego the tendency to seek a single right or “normal” path (see Braithwaite et al., 2001, 2018).

Fourth, adopting a constitutive view of communication and relationships (Baxter, 2014; Braithwaite & Suter, in press), our goal was to understand how discourse dependent families, in this case stepfamilies, interact and navigate family life as they are developing, legitimizing, enacting, and changing the stepfamily, and within the centrally important stepchild-stepparent relationship. Thus, our research questions are oriented to the goal of understanding how family members interact and make sense of different relational pathways, valuing the meanings they have extracted from these relational journeys:

RQ1: What relational trajectories emerge when adult stepchildren describe the development of their positive relationship with a stepparent?

RQ2: How do adult stepchildren describe the meanings, interactions, and processes that shaped relational trajectories as they developed a positive relationship with a stepparent?

Method

Interpretive scholars strive to “understand what action means to people . . . to render human action intelligible” (L. A. Baxter & Babbie, 2004, p. 59). Those scholars studying families center on family members’ reflections on interaction and co-constructing relational meanings (Braithwaite et al., 2014; Tracy, 2020). After identifying the various kinds of relational patterns (trajectories) represented in adult stepchildren’s positivity ratings, we focused on how adult stepchildren interpreted the developmental arc of the relationship, that is, the meanings they offered in making sense of its trajectory and interaction that shaped it.

Participants

Before recruiting participants, we received Internal Review Board clearance at both universities where research team members resided.

Participants were recruited from announcements on university research websites, via social media, and through snowball sampling. Following the approach of other TP researchers, we analyzed turning point graphs and interview transcripts that focused on TPs generated by participants (e.g., Baxter et al., 1999; Braithwaite et al., 2018, 2018). To be included in the study participants needed to meet three criteria. First, participants were stepchildren who were 25 years and older at the time of the interview so they were able to reflect on the early stepfamily years and could look back from, at minimum, an emerging adult vantage point. Second, all participants self-identified the relationship with their stepparent as positive overall. Third, the stepfamilies had to have formed a minimum of four years earlier, stepchildren had to be at least 10 years old at the start of the stepfamily, and the stepfamilies had to be currently intact at the time of the interview. Data for the current study were (a) 38 TP graphs generated during the interviews, each of which documented the changing levels of positivity as the relationship developed over time, and (b) 562 single-spaced pages of interview transcripts in which stepchildren discussed events and processes that shaped each relationship.

Participants were 31 females (81.6%) and seven males (18.4%) ranging from 25 to 52 years ($M = 33.05$, $SD = 7.81$), with most identifying as Caucasian ($n = 36$, 94.7%). The stepfamilies ranged in length from four to 38 years ($M = 18.26$, $SD = 9.60$), with 35 (92.1%) reporting biological siblings and three (7.9%) having no siblings. Thirty-three participants (86.8%) had from one to six stepsiblings ($M = 1.39$, $SD = .79$). Most participants discussed a stepfather ($n = 27$; 71.1%) and seven discussed stepmothers (28.9%).

Procedures

Data were collected using the Retrospective Interview Technique engaged by previous TP scholars (e.g., Baxter et al., 1999; Braithwaite et al., 2018; Huston et al., 1981). At the start of the interview participants were encouraged to talk about both positive and negative turning points. As previous TP scholars have done, we engaged participants in a process of calibrating the graph (Baxter et al., 1999) by expressing what 0% and 100% positive would mean for them. They

were asked to indicate when their stepfamily began and from there to identify and describe all TPs they perceived across the history of the relationship with their stepparent. At each TP, participants rated relational positivity and discussed circumstances, communication, emotions, and actions of the parties involved. Interviewers created graphs as the discussion progressed, plotting the name and date of each TP and ratings of relational positivity (0–100%). At the end of the interview, the interviewer and participant reviewed the whole graph to surface additional understandings of the overall relational trajectory.

This review involved three steps. First, at the more granular level, as interviewers charted each TP on the graph, they asked participants questions that would help us focus on different developmental pathways. For example, we asked why and how the relationship was becoming more or less positive or negative, if it was changing, and how the situation described in the turning point turned out in the end. Second, interviewers asked a series of more global questions at the end of the interview, asking participants to look over the graph as a whole and share their reflections on what it told them about the development of the relationship. To prompt further reflection, interviewers asked a series of open-ended questions, including what best explains why the stepchild and stepparent have developed a positive relationship and, in a perfect world, what, if anything, did the participant wish had been different in their relationship with the stepparent over the years and at present. Finally, interviewers asked stepchildren to talk about what is most positive about their relationship with their stepparent at present.

Data analysis

To answer the first research question and develop the relational trajectories, data analysis proceeded in a two-step process. First, we located distinctive trajectory types by sorting the relational graphs based on the magnitude, turbulence, and temporal features of the positivity ratings. Second, we engaged in qualitative thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning in the discursive constructions of participants within each trajectory type.

Classification of positive stepfamily trajectories

To answer Research Question 1, we used quantitative and visual comparison methods (see Sahlstein Parcell & Maguire, 2014) to classify the trajectories. The first and fourth authors started by sorting the TP graphs with the goal of identifying the different patterns (trajectories). While we were mindful of trajectories previously reported (Baxter et al., 1999; Sahlstein Parcell, 2013), we also attended to differences this study that might yield unique trajectories, including our consideration of (a) overall positive families (previous scholars ignored trends in valence), (b) the longer span of stepfamily life (versus the first four years only), and (c) unique aspects of the stepchild-stepparent relationship. In the end, four trajectory types were identified.

The first part of the analysis involved an assessment of turbulence in the relational graphs. We began by computing change scores for every positivity rating reported by these participants. For example, if a participant rated relational positivity at 60% at TP#3 and 80% at TP#4, the change score was 20%. In the second part, we calculated the mean (13%) and standard deviation (14.8%) for the whole corpus of change scores, using absolute values. Based on this data, a relational graph was considered “low turbulence” if the average of changes in positivity measured less than the mean change score for the whole sample. In contrast, to qualify as “turbulent,” the graph had to meet two criteria: (a) it had to include one or more change scores that exceeded the mean, and (b) changes had to be multidirectional, such that positivity levels increased and decreased as the relationship unfolded over time.

Third, having located graphs that were turbulent, we examined them more closely, looking for additional variations in relationship development. Visual inspection revealed that many relationships were turbulent only during limited periods of time, when positivity plummeted (or, in a few instances, markedly increased) and then recovered. Other graphs showed modest turbulence across the whole relationship, a long-term up-and-down pattern. Fourth, in response to these observations, we created two subcategories: “punctuated” and “modulated.” This is a more nuanced distinction than reported in a previous study of stepfamilies (Baxter et al., 1999), which proposed a

single “high amplitude” pattern. In the end, we used the label *modulated turbulent* to describe trajectories in which changes in positivity stayed within one standard deviation of the mean change score. We reserved the label *punctuated trajectories* for the graphs that exhibited one or more extreme changes in positivity. These changes exceeded the mean change score plus the standard deviation (e.g., $13 + 14.8 = 27.8\%$). Aside from the dramatic changes, punctuated trajectories sometimes resembled (in part) one of the other three trajectory types.

Last, within the meta-category of low turbulence, we made finer distinctions by inspecting trend lines for each graph. *Progressive incline* trajectories showed low positivity ratings (below 50%) early, but gradually increased in positivity, approaching 100% in recent years. Baxter et al. (1999) reported a similar “prolonged” trajectory, however they were limited to four years and this kind of change would not have been tracked. In contrast, *consistent positive* trajectories exhibited modest fluctuations in positivity but never dropped below 75%.

This classification approach accounted for 36 of the 38 trajectories, leaving two unclassified graphs, one graph that (#14) nearly fit with the consistent positive category but included a TP that rated below the 75% mark (65%). The other graph (#35) showed dramatic turbulence during the early years, with ratings ranging from 0 to 55 and back to 0, a gradual climb to 100% and a gradual descent to 60% positivity. These two graphs were eliminated from further analysis.

Thematic analysis: Examining participant interpretations

To answer Research Question Q2, which concerned the meanings, interactions, and processes participants associated with the trajectory of their relationship, the analysis followed those procedures used by previous TP scholars, modeled after the process Braithwaite et al. (2001) used in their qualitative analysis of the Baxter et al. (1999) “feeling like a family” TPs and trajectories. In this study, the 36 successfully classified were sorted based on the four trajectory types we identified. Then we reviewed interview transcripts within each grouping. In reading across transcripts, we considered participant interpretations of individual moments of change (as did Braithwaite et al., 2018) but the focus at present was on the larger arc of relational change, looking to identify the sensemaking schemes used by participants as they

described their experiences in punctuated, modulated, progressive incline, and consistent positive trajectories.

In this phase we engaged the reflexive thematic analysis process suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), involving what they recently described as a process of “continual bending back on oneself – questioning and querying the assumptions we are making in interpretation and coding the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). First, we read the interview transcripts and TP graphs associated with the trajectories described above, recording interpretative notes as we progressed. Second, we identified tentative themes that captured participant constructions of how and why their relationship evolved. We identified themes that appeared to be *unique* to a trajectory, if any, and those that were *shared* by one or more trajectories. Third, we discussed the themes for each trajectory and revised the categories to be more comprehensive. For example, we decided that the key defining feature of “punctuated” trajectory would be drastic change, including not just negative changes but also positive ones. Fourth, the process was repeated with the next trajectory and themes were further modified until the analysis was complete. Fifth, we identified and named the set of themes and illustrative quotations were selected.

The research team ended the data analysis by engaging in the verification process of an interactive data conference (Braithwaite et al., 2017, 2014). The whole research team met and two members who were unfamiliar with the thematizing scheme guided the process of discussing and testing the findings. Based on their feedback, themes were revised, and the team discussed theoretical and practical implications of the analysis and chose final exemplars for this report.

Results

The findings are of two types. First, in answer to Research Question 1, **Table 1** presents the types of trajectories reported by adult stepchildren in positive stepparenting relationships, including their frequency of occurrence in the sample. Visual renderings are presented in Figures 1–4. Second, in answer to Research Question 2, we report the central themes that characterize interaction and development of positive

Table 1. Thematic Analysis of Trajectory Patterns.

<i>Trajectory</i>	<i>Themes</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Punctuated (39.5%)	1. Siding incident 2. Hostile acts	Stepparent chooses sides in conflict Destructive, hurtful communication
Consistent Positive (26.3%)	1. Early assurances 2. Support for parent	Stepparent pledges to invest Witnesses stepparent express support
Progressive Incline (18.4%)	1. Recognize character 2. Trust building	Appreciation of stepparent values Stepparent keeps commitments
Modulated (10.5%)	1. Uncertain beginnings 2. Acts of kindness	Children unprepared for stepparent Moments of benevolence, caring
Unclassified (5.2%)	None	Indistinct

stepparent-stepchild relationships within each trajectory. These themes are listed in Table 1 and elaborated to follow.

Trajectory #1: Punctuated. *“I felt like they had pulled the rug out from under us, ya know?”*

Figure 1 plots the punctuated trajectory type, the one we saw most often in these data ($n = 15, 39.5\%$). As indicated above, these trajectories were distinguished by moments of a dramatic change. Typically, the turbulence involved a steep *drop* in positivity, followed by recovery. In some cases, the recovery was itself sharp and abrupt, as in relationship #33 (see the middle of Figure 1). In other relationships the recovery of positivity was gradual, as illustrated by relationship #32 on the right side of Figure 1. In just two cases (e.g., #36, bottom of Figure 1), the only dramatic change was *positive*. Aside from these dramatic periods of change, punctuated relationships sometimes resembled the other trajectory types, as did #22, which exhibits a “consistent positive” pattern in its later TP ratings. However, two unique themes emerged from the qualitative analysis that focused on the nature of relational events: siding incidents and hostile acts (see Table 1) which provided our rationale for grouping these together.

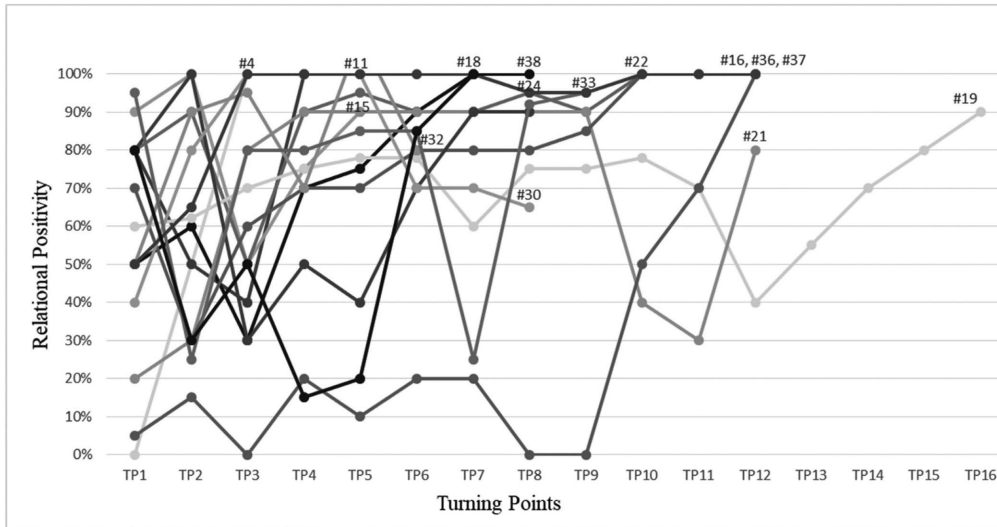


Figure 1. Punctuated (Drastic Drops) Trajectories.

The first theme involved what we labeled as “siding incidents,” where a stepparent expressed allegiance to the spouse or the stepchild during a time of intense family conflict. In instances where the stepparent sided with the spouse or partner (the residential parent), positive ratings plummeted for the stepchildren. For example, stepson #19 badly wanted to attend graduate school but found himself in a heated conflict with his accountant father, who insisted that the son prepare a slide presentation on the cost and benefits of such a move. Much to the chagrin of stepson #19, the stepmother sided with his father, who ended up rejecting the son’s graduate school plan (TP#12). The stepson had come to count on his stepmother’s support in family disagreements, and he was unhappy that she had supported, in his words, “dad’s play:”

I was fucking pissed. Not amused. At this point, I’m making the call that I think is the best, the most meaningful, and I am met with active and open resistance and skepticism. So, I was less than amused. (964-967; Note: *exemplars are notated by interview and transcript lines numbers*)

Another example was related by participant #31, who had broken off a long romantic relationship, found a new one, and was preparing to cohabit with her new partner. Family strife erupted when her

mother, disapproving of the new relationship, refused to provide the financial and emotional support participant #31 had come to expect. Much to her disappointment, her stepfather sided with the mother and “withdrew as well.” She explained:

. . . I felt like they had pulled the rug out from under us, ya know? That like, they were gonna help and um again, come and, ya know, help me resolve this issue I had. And be that resource. And then all of the sudden, because of this fight [with mother], that was gone! And so that was a little bit of a dark moment, but it all ended up working out for the best. (450-454)

In a second set of cases, the stepparent sided with the child, leading to a major increase in positivity ratings (e.g., #36, TP 10). During high school, stepdaughter #22 was experiencing conflict with her mother and began experimenting with alcohol, even burying a bottle in the yard to share it with friends. Her stepfather caught her in the act and forced her to empty the bottle in the grass, however he chose not to tell her mother. Rather, he sided with the daughter, devising a “punishment” that allowed them to bond at a time when she badly needed support:

So he came up to me later and said, “Listen, so I have two tickets to a violin concert, and you have to go.” Cause he knew that I would absolutely hate that! My mom made me play violin when I was younger; like it was not what I wanted to do. I hated it. I don’t like it. I thought it was stupid. And so, that was his *punishment* to me. I mean, for me, like, I was kinda like “OK, this guy, he, he gets me, like, he’s a clever smartass. Even in his punishments, he’s clever as hell.” (152-158)

In a third kind of siding, the stepparent skillfully played to both sides, serving as a buffer or mediator during a time of pitched conflict between stepchild and parent. Stepdaughter #30 explained that she often “buted heads” with her mother, a pattern that asserted itself during the run up to the wedding of mother and stepfather:

I ended up crying at the church, and my mom cried at the church and that was one of the first times that [stepdad] sort of played mediator for us. So, he came and talked me down and said, “you know, your mom loves you, she’s just nervous and excited!” So he sort of relayed that to my mom, how I was feeling, and just kind of like worked as a buffer. I mean my mom and I have a good relationship. But we butt heads sometimes and don’t see eye to eye. So he does that to help us and that was the first time he did that, that I remember him playing mediator between us. (115-120)

In addition to siding, a second theme of the punctuated trajectory involved hostile acts by one or both parties. These were hurtful or destructive communicative acts, some of which occurred within conflict episodes, a kind of TP identified by Braithwaite et al. (2018) in 10% of stepchild-stepparent dyads. Several examples occurred when the stepchild was young, and the stepfamily was in their early stages. These hostile acts created drastic drops in positivity, leaving the child feeling criticized, fearful, unsupported, or vulnerable. For example, stepdaughter #24 described being startled and upset by an “ultimatum” issued by her stepfather to her brother. She worried that she might be subjected to a similar act. Stepdaughter #33 recalled a time when, as a young girl, she witnessed her normally peaceful stepdad “yell” at her mom (and her mother yelled back). The stepdaughter clearly remembered the hostile tone of the incident. In another example, stepdaughter #18 recalled being harshly criticized publicly by her stepmother, who disapproved of her behavior with a new boyfriend, referring to the stepdaughter as “irresponsible” and the stepmother expressed, “[stepdaughter] just thinks that she can act however she wants.” The stepdaughter explained her perception of the hostile act, “She made the comment that had to do with boys and drinking in front of my grandma and a couple of my aunts” (316–319). A young teen at the time, stepdaughter #18 cherished the bond with her grandmother, who offered stability at a tumultuous time. Humiliated, she lashed out at her stepmother saying: “‘You’re a horrible person.’ I called her the B-word and I was like, ‘You’re so disrespectful. This is my family, not yours, and you’re sharing my private stories!’” (320–322).

Both siding incidents and hurtful acts had potent effects in stepfamilies, especially early in a stepfamily relationship, as is visible in Figure 1. These incidents appeared to shake the foundations of crucial stepparent-stepchild bonds, sometimes just as boundaries and roles were starting to solidify after an early period of family uncertainty. Although these moments of plummeting positivity were temporary, the relational recovery sometimes took months or years.

Taken together, these episodes of punctuation and recovery highlight the perilous and essential role played by the stepparent, especially at moments of family conflict and stepchild vulnerability. In these families, stepparents supported the stepchild when the residential parent could not or would not. In other cases, whether they realized at the time or not, the stepparent seemed to reap the benefits from the stepchild's eventual understanding of why supporting their partner (the residential parent) was the right thing for the stepparent to do as an act of solidarity at a critical moment in the marriage.

Trajectory #2: Consistent positive: “. . . *he was really invested in myself and my sister.*”

The second trajectory type, consistent positive ($n = 10$, 26.3%) represented those relationships that started at high levels of positivity and fluctuated very little, remaining above 75% (see **Figure 2**). Within this narrow band of change in relational positivity, most of these stepchild-stepparent relationships experienced slight increases in positivity, although several also reported modest decreases before recovering, with all but one ending at 100% positivity (this one ending at 90%). Several participants (e.g., #2 & #5) reported ratings of 100% for all turning points. We note that case #31 started at a lower point of positivity but it quickly assumed the pattern of positive consistency (at 25%, the two early jumps in positivity were not quite large enough to qualify #31 for the punctuated trajectory type).

From the thematic analysis we developed two unique subthemes, both expressed in early stepfamily years. The first involved early assurances, recognition that stepparents' dedication was evident from the very early stages. As indicated by the initial ratings of relational positivity, these stepchildren reported feeling assured by early evidence of the stepparents' commitment to the family. Subsequent TPs

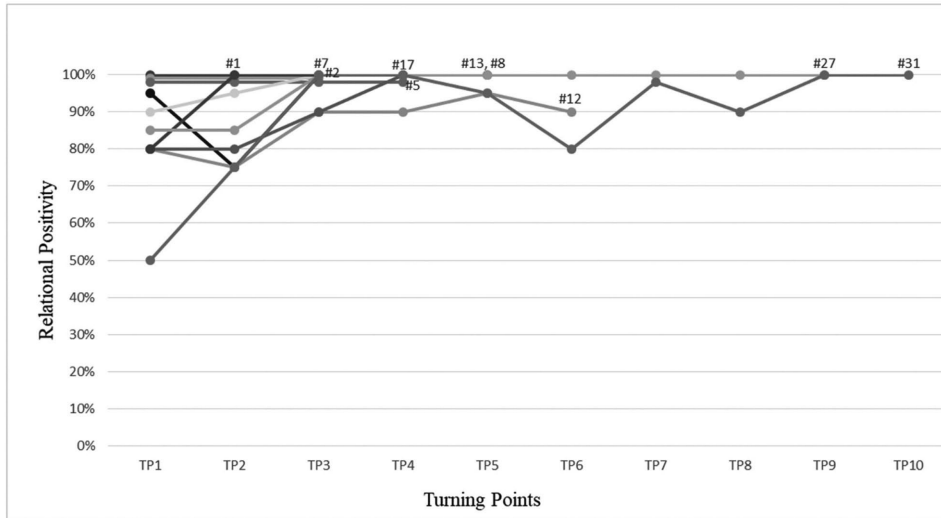


Figure 2. Consistent Positive Trajectories.

were interpreted as confirmations of these early understandings. A second subtheme was labeled support for parent, which involved witnessing expressions of love and support for the residential parent (see Table 1).

The first theme, *early assurances*, is well-illustrated by stepdaughter #8, who perceived that her stepfather was committed to her from the very beginning: “. . . I knew that he was really invested in myself and my sister. And that he wasn’t there just to be my mother’s husband” (228). As the relationship unfolded over time, this stepdaughter experienced and described a series of instances in which that investment was memorably confirmed. For example, in her teens, the stepfather dedicated time and effort to teach her how to drive. His response at her wedding also left her feeling assured: “. . . four hours before the wedding when I told [my stepfather] that my [biological] dad wasn’t coming, and you know, and would he walk me down the aisle?” (446). For stepdaughter #8, her wedding was part of a larger relational narrative, one in which the stepfather was, and always had been, committed to her happiness. Stepson #13 reported similar experiences. With a nonresidential father who was not invested, stepson #13 formed an early and lasting bond with his stepdad. He explained, “I wasn’t seeing my dad all that often . . . so [my stepfather] was the male figure in my

life” (162). The theme of early assurance was further illustrated by stepdaughter #17, who noted that her stepfather introduced her as “my daughter” from the very beginning of the relationship. She also highlighted a story from her wedding and choosing her stepfather to walk her down the aisle:

Just knowing how much he was there for me from, I know it was just 8th grade until last year, but I mean, we had such a positive relationship. And he was there for me so much that, I mean, that’s what made my decision and everything that day. (329-331)

The second subtheme emerged from reports of the stepchildren witnessing the stepparent engaging in support for the parent, involving nurturing, caring, and/or loving actions toward their mother or father. These acts had lasting and positive impact. Stepdaughter #12 expressed:

I was just feeling like my dad had finally found a match that’s just great for him. And she’s [stepmother] so wonderful for him and he is so wonderful for her, and they both know it. And I thought “my god this is the first time I’ve ever seen this in my life, with my parents.” And so up close too. (530-533)

In another instance, when stepdaughter #17 moved away to college, she witnessed one of many such moments, “. . . watching him support my mom. My mom just bawled when she dropped me off, and just seeing him support her and be there for her was good to see.” Stepson #13 expressed the theme indirectly, referring to a time when his stepfather experienced a minor stroke.

. . . the concern I had at the moment [was] about how devastating it would be if something were to happen to him, not only because of how bad it would be for my mom, but just how generally sad and kind of life changing that would be. (349-353)

In some cases, it was seeing a stepparent engaging in a pattern of mutual support with their residential parent that yielded a stable sense of positivity. Stepdaughter #12 witnessed her dad and stepmother working through financial hardship of the stepmother:

I think for me and [stepmother] it also just showed that, it made me have a stronger commitment to their relationship because I knew my dad had patience with her to work through these financial shortcomings that she hadAnd I guess what I'm realizing during this conversation is that my positivity, my positive feelings toward her also were sort of dependent upon. (428-431)

For the stepchildren, these kinds of relational processes represented enactments of the stability and steadiness that characterized this particular consistent positive path.

Before leaving this section, we note a puzzling finding. Three of these consistent positive trajectories (#1, #2, and #5) were invariant, with *all* TPs rated at 100% positivity. We wondered how or why participants would report no deviation from this high level of positivity over the years. Our observations are tentative, given the smaller number of cases. First, we note that these 100% positive relationships involved few turning points (*range* = 2-4). Compared to most relationships we studied, the TPs were infrequent and (apparently) uneventful. Second, in two of the cases, the stepfamily formed when the stepchild was an adult, more out of the daily orbit of the stepparent. Relational distance might have created limited opportunities for contact and discerning relational evaluations. Third, it appeared that these adult stepchildren were simply happy that their parent had found a new partner, freeing adult offspring from worry and responsibility for their parents' wellbeing. As stepdaughter #5 explained, "I was looking for someone to be a husband to my mom." Finally, we acknowledge that these ratings could reflect a social desirability bias on the part of the stepchild or simply interviewer error. While this particular pathway warrants more research attention, we believe it important to include these consistently 100% positivity relationships as possible relational outcomes.

Trajectory #3: Progressive incline: “He was always right there.”

The progressive incline trajectories ($n = 7, 18.4\%$) showed a steady change over time, starting at low or middle ratings of positivity (in two cases starting at zero and 15%), and moving to extremely positive ratings of 90% or more. **Figure 3** presents these graphs. In four of these relationship graphs, every TP was associated with increased positivity. The other three cases showed a clear positive trend, with just one minor negative or neutral TP.

From thematic analysis, we developed two unique themes. The first involves participant recognition of the stepparents’ enduring character and values. The second theme emphasizes relational trust built through sacrifice, time, and/or commitment (see Table 1). Regarding the first theme, it appeared that increasingly positive relationships were formed as stepparents (and sometimes stepchildren) observed memorable displays of character. Participants offered comments on the stepparents’ moral commitments, goodwill, admirable traits, and values. For example, stepson #10 noted a pattern that was reinforced when he moved home to live with his mother and stepfather after college. “. . . He [stepfather] made a place for me to stay in his home for a second time” (206–207) and whenever “. . . I did something relatively bratty, [stepfather] was very gracious about accommodating me

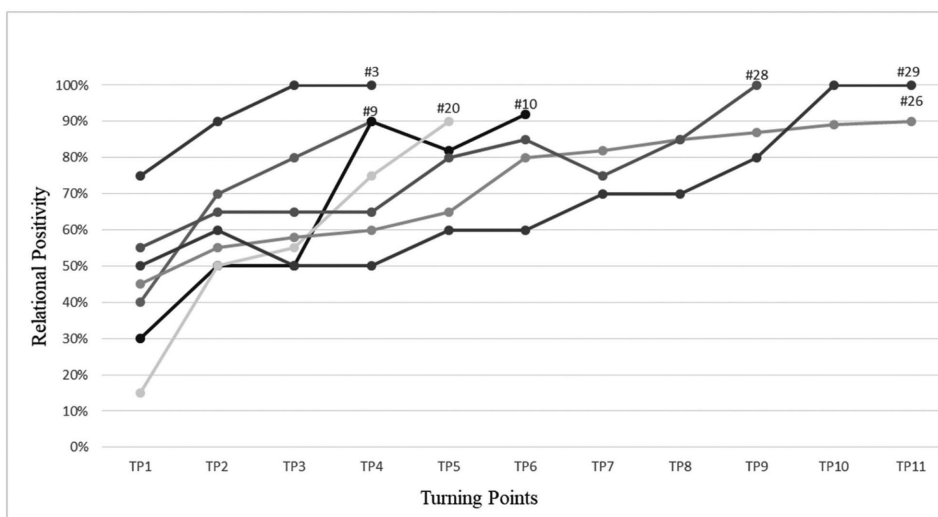


Figure 3. Progressive Incline Trajectories.

. . . just very kind about it” (208–209). Similarly, stepdaughter #28 recalled a consistently supportive stepfather: “But like when I was in high school, I swam and I danced and he never missed a swim meet, never missed a dance recital, never missed anything! He was always right there along with the events” (547–549).

Other examples reveal recognitions of character that become long-lasting relational influences. Stepdaughter #3 reflected on the time her stepfather implemented a curfew: “I never really had a curfew before, and then he moved in, and suddenly at 17 I have one. I came dragging in way past midnight, and he was sitting up waiting for me!” (146–147). While she resisted her stepfather’s values at the time, she came to appreciate them when she reached adulthood, became a parent, and enjoyed a positive relationship with her stepfather, “. . . he influenced my parenting to be less free flowing, a little more structured” (161–162).

The second subtheme involved the ways trust was gradually built (or repaired) as the stepchild–stepparent relationship progressed. Trust was often (re)built through intentional acts, by both stepparent and stepchild, in ways that preserved the family’s integrity. Some cases highlighted stepparent trustworthiness, often by words or deeds that showed commitment to the family; others showcased attempts on the part of the stepparent or stepchild to regain trust once breached. Stepdaughter #28 was skeptical about the man her mother was dating and unenthusiastic about plans for him to move to their home. However, over time he convinced her to trust his good intentions, adjusting his life to protect she and her brother, including driving an extra hour to work each day so they would not have to change schools. She also witnessed her stepfather’s long term “replanting” project, as he gradually moved “an acre” of his plants:

I mean he uprooted, like not just his housing but you know, like replanting! . . . He uprooted [his plants], transported them, and planted them in our backyard, just so we didn’t have to like, *uproot* our life, because we had been living in the same house our whole [life] . . . Well it didn’t hit me immediately, but it did slowly, probably about when they actually got married, because this was a little bit before, it was like “Oh, wow! He’s doing a lot of work.” (109–115)

The theme of gradually building trust was also expressed by stepson #20:

We had spent the past . . . most of my time in college . . . trying to work on our relationship, trying to do small things, hang out when we could, hang out as a family when we could. And that really seemed to help us bump up my trust level with him. Yeah, I would say a greater feeling of overall happiness in your life. You're finally able to really connect with your family, as a family instead of feeling fragmented for so many years. (331-336)

Along the way, this stepson also experienced a falling-out with his stepfather, but stressed how trust went both ways, “[I] . . . took it upon myself to apologize and try to rebuild the relationship” (277). This pair of examples illustrates the dyadic nature of some progressive inclines, as they jointly exacted a path toward positivity through communicative acts, such as time spent and offering apologies when warranted.

Trajectory #4: Modulated turbulent: *“We didn’t hate her, just didn’t . . . want her around.”*

Four of the trajectories ($n = 4$, 10.5%) were of the type we labeled “modulated turbulent.” These included both positive and negative changes in positivity ratings over the course of the relationship, with at least one change meeting or exceeding the mean change score of 13%. The changes in relational positivity were less dramatic (thus “modulated”) than those in the punctuated trajectories, but of higher magnitude than those classified as consistent positive. We note that participant #25 included a jump in positivity early in the relationship, one which could qualify it for the punctuated trajectory type. But overall, its turbulence was muted, and the level of positivity never reached the high levels observed in the punctuated trajectories. We noted that all four modulated turbulent relationships exhibited a larger number of TPs, relative to the other trajectories. All eventually reached higher levels of positivity: all above 50% and three above 80% at their last reported TP. Cases #23 and #25 are similar in that the trajectories

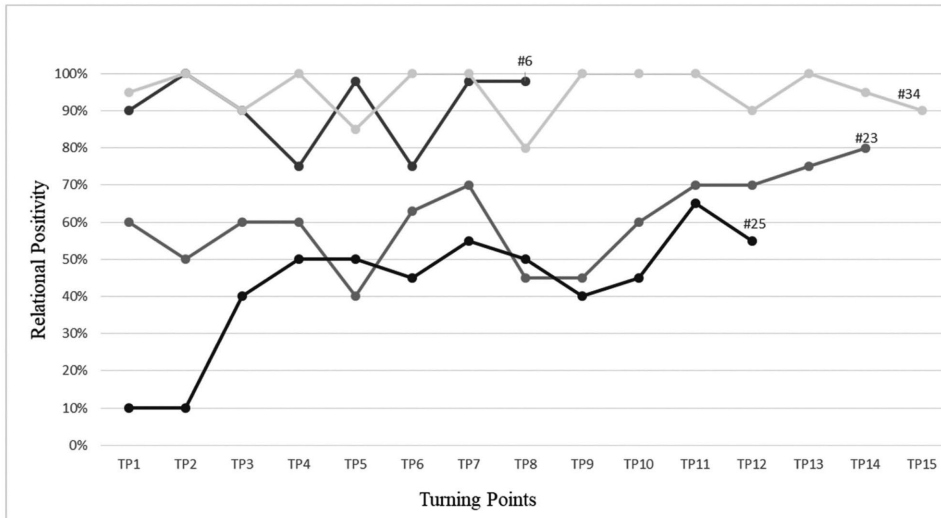


Figure 4. Turbulent-Modulated Trajectories.

included periods when positivity ratings were quite low (below 50%). In contrast, cases #6 and #34 included moments of turbulence, but they remained quite positive overall.

We identified two themes in the modulated turbulent trajectory: *uncertain beginnings* and *acts of kindness* (see Table 1). The two cases with low positivity scores, #23 and #25, shared uncertain beginnings, as stepfamilies sometimes do. Indeed, these two stepsons had yet to reach their teen years when, to their mystification, stepmothers appeared in their lives, with little warning. In contrast, in relationships #6 and #16, the stepparent was introduced more gradually. For example, it was not that stepson #23 found his stepmother unlikable at the beginning, rather, that the stepson reported being “weirded out” and perceived that a stranger had moved into the house: “I guess and didn’t really want much to do with her. I avoided her in the beginning . . . I mean, it was more . . . like we didn’t hate her, we just didn’t really want her around.” Eventually the pair “started butting heads” (52–54). For this stepson, as his father and stepmother’s marriage plans were announced and it became clear that the stepmother’s presence would be permanent, the relationship dropped below the midpoint (TP #5).

In the second case of the modulated turbulent trajectory, stepson #25 identified his father as a “preacher” whose divorce created uncertainty for his two young children. The stepson, who was 13 when the

stepfamily began, described observing with some dismay as their father dated eligible women from the church, none of whom they were allowed to know well. Finally, the father reviewed his “choices” with the children, asking them to “pick” one for him to marry. The father ended up marrying a woman the children most disliked, described by stepson #25 as “very strict,” emotionally cold, and incapable of play. After a negative start (10% positivity), the relationship remained distant for decades, but a few moments of marked improvement bumped above the midpoint, with a final smaller downturn to 50%. A significant increase in positivity (TP #3) occurred when the children were finally allowed to gather with their stepmother’s family, some of whom were surprisingly approachable:

. . . during that moment I had a feeling of family for like the first time. Family togetherness. And there was no conflict or anything, it was just sort of just all fun stuff. That was one of the few times I can remember a large gathering of people in one space talking together like all sitting around the table. There were like 15 of us there just kind of like hanging out. (166-170)

As all these turbulent-modulated relationships progressed from uncertain beginnings, the stepchildren traversed memorable periods of difficulty, some of which corresponded with substantive changes in the positivity with the stepparent. For example, significant drops in positivity were associated with “teenage angst” (stepdaughter #34, TP #5) and ill-advised teenaged partying (stepson #25, TP #8). In several instances (e.g., stepson #6, TP #4) the stepchild and their siblings perceived their stepmother favored her child over the stepchildren. In other cases, events involving an absent residential parent resulted in sharp drops in positivity, most significantly for stepdaughter #34, whose biological father died. In the case of stepdaughter #6 who was raised by her stepfather, she chose late in her teen years to move into her biological father’s home, despite his absence from her early life. She perceived this move left her stepfather bewildered and the relationship experienced a drop in positivity at that time.

A second theme that resonated in three of these cases (#6, #23, #34) was a memorable act of kindness, a TP that previous scholars

described as a prosocial action (e.g., Baxter et al., 1999; L. Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Braithwaite et al., 2018). In these instances, the stepchildren reported TPs in which stepparents reacted to challenging relational moments with positive behaviors that stepchildren noted with significant upticks in positivity ratings, hence, modulating the turbulence. For example, stepchild #6 clearly recalled her stepfather buying her Valentine's Day roses at a difficult moment early in their relationship. Stepchild #34 described her stepfather building the stepfamily a home, an effort that signified "a new beginning." After a rough start and some rocky periods during the teen years, stepson #23 described several actions his stepmother took that he credited with accelerating the positive trajectory of the relationship. For example, his stepmother signed him up for swimming lessons and faithfully drove him and his friends to their practices (TP #6) and backed his efforts to drive and buy a car (TP #10), signaling her support and reflecting the stepson's subsequent growing trust:

She, when I got my learner's permit, she let me drive everywhere. My dad usually didn't let me drive as much as her. But she like, had me drive all the time when I was with her. That was really cool. And when you have your permit, driving is like the coolest thing to do. And she would always flip me the keys and be like "[Stepson], you're driving" and I was thinking, "Hell yeah!" (188-192)

In contrast, stepson #25 offered no memorable efforts at kindness or redemption on the part of his stepmother. Now in adulthood, stepson #25 indicated he can look back and conclude his stepmother has struggled with limited relational skills, to the point where his own young children are uncomfortable in her presence. However, in the interview this stepson indicated he had developed grudging respect for her, largely because she has been a steadfast companion to his father. For that reason, he considers the relationship to be positive, if only slightly so:

She's a terrible listener so there was like no point in bringing any of this up to her. My strongest relationship with her is pretty much mutually silent respect, and that what makes

it positive for me. It's not like we're really close or relate or anything like that. It's like we both mutually respect each other. That's pretty much all about that one. (323-327)

In sum, the modulated turbulent relationships were characterized by a large number of modest fluctuations, eventually ending with higher levels of positivity.

Discussion

In this study we responded to calls for additional research on the nature of relational trajectories generally (Sahlstein Parcell, 2013), and in stepfamilies specifically (Waldron et al., 2018), purposely doing so with a focus on stepfamilies that are perceived as overall positive. Our goal was to create a more nuanced portrait of multiple pathways of stepfamily development across the lifespan of the stepfamily and to provide new insights about positive, longer-term stepparenting relationships from the perspective of adult stepchildren.

In Research Question 1 we asked about the nature of trajectories in positive stepfamily relationships, finding both similarity and difference to earlier studies. For example, our progressive incline pattern resembles the prolonged trajectory reported earlier by scholars (Baxter et al., 1999; Braithwaite et al., 2001) in their study of stepfamilies over the first four years. However, by looking at stepfamilies across the length of their relationships in this study, we learned, for example, that some stepfamilies see gradual improvements continue for many years, with the relationship achieving high levels of positivity only in the stepchildrens' adulthood. Moreover, we uncovered processes, such as revelations of character and trust building, associated with this pattern of later relational improvement.

A unique contribution of this study is the distinction of punctuated and modulated patterns of relationship development. For these overall positive relationships, we observed that a small set experienced modest turbulence over long periods of time. The more interesting observation was the number of participants who reported dramatic shifts in positivity. Some of these shifts occurred in the early years of stepfamily life, which researchers have often described as turbulent (e.g.,

Baxter et al., 1999; Coleman et al., 2013; Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Papernow, 2013). It is encouraging to be able to identify the possibility of early positive stepparenting relationships to stepfamilies.

By looking at stepfamily relationships across their lifespan, from our findings we suggest that some stepparenting bonds are also buffeted by change later in the relationship. Researchers have reported marked moments of turbulence in other relationships, for example, in Sahlstein Sahlstein Parcell and Maguire (2014) study on military couples, they identified a similar pattern they labeled “dipped.” Our study adds to this scholarship, as we unpacked these moments of extreme turbulence in stepfamily life. Moreover, our participants helped us identify two kinds of punctuating events: siding incidents, which could be positive or negative from the perspective of stepchildren, especially when stepparents sided with their parent rather than the child, and hostile acts. Additionally, because we studied relationships that are currently positive, our findings also provide evidence that stepfamilies can indeed recover from such drastic drops in positivity.

From our findings we also observe that, from the very beginning, some stepchildren experience a stable pattern of relational positivity. Consistent with previous findings, this perception was a function of steady investment of emotional support and other resources, typically by the stepparent (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Interestingly, for some older stepchildren, this positivity was closely linked to feelings of relief, a welcoming response to a stepparent who proved to be a strong emotional anchor for a parent who might otherwise have needed more support from their adult offspring. The importance of steady support is consistent with Ganong and Coleman (2017) contention that in later stages of relational development, patterns of interaction in stepfamilies might be like those in families of origin along some dimensions, including caregiving support.

A contrast to this steady positive pattern is what we labeled a modulated turbulent trajectory, which involved uncertain beginnings and numerous modest changes in positivity, often linked to normative life passages of the child, especially adolescence, where parental divorce and becoming a stepfamily can be particularly challenging. In several cases, timely acts of kindness by the stepparent, for example, offering driving lessons, had memorable impacts for the stepchildren

who were adjusting or experiencing normal challenges of adolescence (Bray, 1999). It appeared these actions acted as course corrections, smoothing the natural bumps that occur in most parent-child relationships, which can be magnified in stepfamilies (Ganong & Coleman, 2017), perhaps keeping rating of the relationship positive, even if only moderately so.

In Research Question 2 we asked about participant interpretations of the interactions and processes that shaped the different trajectories. It was here that we found the most compelling conceptual contributions of the study. As we noted in the findings, each of the four main trajectories were associated with seemingly *unique* forms of relational communication between stepchild and stepparent. For example, the process of taking sides was prominent in punctuated trajectories. Trust building emerged as a key theme in the progressive incline trajectory. However, all four trajectories also exhibited three *common* characteristics: (a) stepparent sensitivity to the stepchild's vulnerability, (b) stepparent adding value to the family, and (c) stepchild maturation and reframing the past. We see these three characteristics as conceptual "through lines" that may resonate in most positive stepfamilies, at least from the reflections of adult stepchildren.

First, many stepchildren described life events that left them feeling vulnerable: illness of the residential parent, difficulties in school, romantic breakups, or financial challenges. Across these overall positive stepparent-stepchild relations, a crucial part of the relational narrative was that the stepparent provided support when it was sorely needed. In some cases (i.e., consistent positive trajectories), the stepparent had always provided support across the span of the relationship in other cases (progressive incline), the stepparent's supportive response was compelling new evidence that they could be trusted in a parenting role. In still other cases (i.e., punctuated trajectories), support from the child's mother or father was perceived to be absent or inadequate. In these cases, the stepparent's siding with the child was perceived to be an intensely positive relational experience. Based on this evidence, we argue that stepparents' communicative responses at moments of stepchild vulnerability should be a feature of developmental theorizing.

A second through line of positive stepfamily trajectories involved stepparents adding value to the family by making material, financial,

and/or emotional contributions that were otherwise underrepresented. For example, a stepfather brought financial support and savvy to a household that was struggling to pay their bills or a stepmother was able to serve as a buffer in conflicts between father and son. Across our interviews, stepparents were often described as welcome new sources of mentoring, fun, or relationship advice. This finding complements recent research on the experiences of stepparents (Oliver-Blackburn et al., 2021), who reported appreciating the opportunity to provide advice and guidance to their stepchildren, or the reflections of stepchildren at different turning points (Braithwaite et al., 2018). Oliver-Blackburn et al. (2021) argued these supportive acts are evidence of stepparents integrating and balancing the roles of friend and parent, rather than perceiving only one of these roles is possible, especially in light of stepchildren's seemingly contradictory desire of simultaneous parenting and non-parenting from stepparents (Baxter et al., 2004). Theorists and practitioners should consider how the seemingly contradictory roles of friend and parent are negotiated and enacted over the course of relationship. Of course, stepchildren can also bring resources to the relationship, providing the stepparent with warmth and kin connections. This reciprocal offering of support in positive stepparent-stepchild relationships, or springing from, them deserves further study.

The third through line across these trajectories was the importance of life experience and maturation. Because we interviewed stepchildren over age 25, we could listen as they reframed or reflected reframing of relational events of the past, having had time to mature and absorb what had happened in their lives (Papernow, 2013). For example, a stepson, now in adulthood, understood that his stepmother sided with his father because it was important for them to express solidarity early in their marriage or a stepdaughter, now herself a parent, appreciated in retrospect the firm discipline of her stepfather. In addition, our sense is that the continued growth and development of stepparents is underappreciated in the literature. As examples, we heard stepchildren discuss stepparents who learned to be more emotionally supportive, apologized for hostile acts they had committed, and developed better relationships with the stepchild's noncustodial parent as the years went on. This growth speaks to the importance of a lifespan perspective, in which the qualities of stepfamily members

and “the bonds have continued to gain strength and warmth over the years” (Papernow, 2013, p. 159). Ganong and Coleman (2017) suggested that one limitation of the stepparenting studies is that they do not take a longitudinal view. While these present data are retrospective, focusing on turning points does help scholars reflect on different relational patterns possible over time. Our findings suggests that professionals help stepfamilies take the long view in developing positive bonds.

Implications for family communication theory

Our study builds on existing theoretical and empirical work by scholars of human development (e.g., Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Papernow, 2013) on how stepfamilies grow and change. It is responsive to calls for data and theorizing about the communication processes that help develop long-term, positive stepfamily bonds (Braithwaite et al., 2018), affirming that relational communication processes, such as offering support and assurances, can catalyze and define the path to positivity (Ganong et al., 1999). These can be added to the list of family communication processes highlighted by stepfamily scholars, such as affinity seeking (Ganong et al., 2021; L. H. Ganong et al., 2011), forgiveness (Waldron et al., 2018), or balancing the communicative requirements of stepparenting roles of friend of parent (Oliver-Blackburn et al., 2021).

Several of our findings resonate with Afifi’s (Afifi et al., 2022) theory of resilience and relational load (TRRL), positing that relational resilience is in part a function of emotional capital, harnessing the resources that can be deployed to help prevent the effects of external stressors and better navigate them when they do occur (Afifi et al., 2022). The scholars explain that “TRRL includes the notion of partners having a communal orientation toward their stress, and life’s challenges in general, which makes them more inclined to invest in their relationships” (p. 343), and that positive communication patterns will help relational parties avoid depleting relational reserves in stressful times. Our data certainly provide evidence that stepparents in these positive relationships are perceived to contribute valued resources to their families during times of change and stress. Importantly, in some

cases (consistent positive trajectories) these resources may be stockpiled through steady investment, leaving the family less vulnerable to stressors. TRRL also suggests that increased communal orientation can help families ward off, or respond to, adversity (Afifi, 2018). The role of siding in punctuated trajectories connects to this idea, as it appears that stepparents are grappling with how to unify the family during moments of stress and disunity. We believe this theory can be useful for stepfamily scholars.

Along with other scholars, we have substantiated the central role of stepparent communication in shaping different stepfamily trajectories. Our findings suggest that the timing and nature of their contributions may be crucial when, for example, communicating assurances during uncertain times, offering support at vulnerable moments, and performing acts of kindness during a turbulent time in the stepchild's life. These findings confirm previous research suggesting that stepparent communication of positive regard is among the more important influences on the perceived quality of stepparenting relationships (Schrodt, 2006). They also suggest that depending on the developmental stage of the stepchild, the stepparent may need to step in to communicate as a trusted adult, a parent, or both (see also Oliver-Blackburn et al., 2021). From our data, we witnessed how these stepparent-stepchild relationships changed over time as the participants navigated key experiences such as illnesses, weddings, and the stepchild becoming a parent themselves, underscoring the importance of taking a lifespan view. Finally, our findings also have implications for family system perspectives (see Dallos & Vetere, 2012; Yoshimura & Galvin, 2018) as we see how relational trajectories help shape the larger family system, potentially providing a stabilizing influence and facilitating support for children when residential or nonresidential parents are disengaged or attempt to reengage in with their children.

Translational section

Many of our findings have practical value for family members who find themselves in a stepfamily and experiencing a particular relational trajectory, and helping stepfamilies understand these different patterns can be a helpful tool. For example, to manage the drastic

drops in positivity associated with some punctuated trajectories, stepparents may need professional help understanding the inherent challenges of being in triangulated relationships (Baxter et al., 2006; Dallos & Vetere, 2012; Yoshimura & Galvin, 2018) and the relational implications of stepparents not siding with the stepchild. Stepparents may need to explain to the stepchild why they are siding with the residential or nonresidential parent and may need professional intervention to develop strategies to keep from either being caught in the middle or putting children in that position (Braithwaite et al., 2008). Professionals may help parents and stepparents find opportunities to support the whole family rather than one member over another. Knowing that even positive relationships can be punctuated by extremely challenging moments may help stepfamily members persist and retain hope when times are tough.

The finding that positive relationships develop in different patterns is an important message for stepfamilies, removing that pressure to find the *one* right way to develop and resist the pressure to see positivity develop immediately, which may put unrealistic expectations on these relationships (Braithwaite et al., 2001). Removing expectations can give the stepfamily freedom to interact, develop roles and functional best practices. In addition, it would be helpful for stepparents, their partners, and the professionals who advise them to understand the factors that positive stepchild-stepparent relationships have in common. For example, despite the differences across families, stepparents may benefit from learning to recognize and respond supportively to stepchild vulnerability. Therapists and educators can help family members learn about the role of interaction in co-creating desired family structure and roles (Baxter, 2014; Braithwaite & Suter, in press), finding opportunities for building affinity and closeness (L. H. Ganong et al., 2011), especially in preparing stepchildren for the new family (Ganong et al., 2021).

Limitations & future directions

Although TP analysis is a well-established tool for studying relational change, lifespan researchers caution that autobiographical memory may be subject to biases, including capacity limitations, that restrict

the number of events that participants tend to report (Schroots et al., 2004). Some researchers have responded by focusing on integrated life narratives rather than specific life events (e.g., McAdams, 2013). As Schroots et al. (2004) observed, tools for collecting prospective memory are potentially valuable to lifespan researchers. Members of stepfamilies may anticipate the future by drawing on memories of how family life “should” unfold, and these memories may vary from those formed in non-divorced families. We encourage researchers to consider the full range of methodological options.

Our intentional decision to examine the stepchild perspective is a strength of this study, given the importance of stepchild adjustment to stepfamily success, and it is an obvious limitation as well. Our intent is to continue to study relational trajectories, comparing perspectives of stepparents and stepchildren. In addition, our findings hint at the possibility that stepfathers and stepmothers are more prominently featured in certain kinds of trajectories which we hope to flesh out when comparing trajectories and study the ways in which co-parenting experiences within and without the stepfamily household might shape these trajectories. While we intentionally examined older stepchildren in this study, the voices of younger stepchildren are largely absent in stepfamily research and deserve to be heard. Finally, our sample represents a certain kind of family diversity in these discourse dependent families (Galvin, 2006), and we are looking for way to study developmental trajectories in families of varying ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds as well as those with LGBTQ+ parents.

Conclusion

We hope to help parents and stepparents understand that interacting and developing a positive stepparent-stepchild relationship often takes time and patience to win the trust of the child and allow them to mature, removing the pressure for instant family results. In some cases, stepchildrens’ understanding and appreciation of the stepparent comes only in retrospect. We hope these findings encourage all members of the stepfamily to put in the time and work to develop functional and healthy bonds and communication practices. Of course, new turning points will emerge as these relationships evolve through later

stages of the lifespan, bringing new challenges. Nonetheless, continued interaction and investments may reap positive benefits as individual members and the family systems mature.

* * * *

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