

STEPFAMILY STORIES: HOW STORIES ABOUT RITUALS  
COMMUNICATE A SENSE OF FAMILY

by

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate my efforts on this thesis to my family. We have created a life together through love, acceptance, and mutual respect. The gift of your support and encouragement made the hard work worthwhile.

And to all the stepfamily members who find a way to open their hearts, accept a stranger, and create a real sense of family no matter how difficult the circumstances of its origins may have been, you inspire me.

And to those who have not yet found a way to heal their wounds, I hope that over time and through shared experiences, you, too, will know the joy of creating your own family.

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## ABSTRACT

Recognizing that family (of any type) is a negotiated construction of individuals provides an insight into how people create the unique relationship that we call “family.” To gain a deeper understanding of stepfamily identity and how a sense of family is constructed, a life story interview approach was used to gather narratives from 20 adult children of stepfamilies. The narratives were analyzed using a qualitative/interpretive method, resulting in a balanced view of stepfamilies as having both positive and negative features similar to any other family type. It was found that individual adherence to rituals within the stepfamily provides a sense of family through symbolic communication. Additionally, it was found that children of stepfamilies describe a sense of family resulting from negotiating a complex set of relationships using an offer/accept interaction. This symbolic communication interaction provides children and stepparents the opportunity to accept or reject individual relationships within the larger framework of family rituals.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Imagine you suddenly find your family gained a new member. You did not invite this person to move in, nor do you appreciate the changes this stranger begins to make in the routines of your family. Unsettling, yes, but even worse, you now find out that you no longer get to stay in your home every day. The stranger gets to live there seven days a week, but you have to go to another residence every other weekend and Wednesday nights. You have to alternate holidays, Christmas Eve at home, Christmas Day at the other home. As you try to regain some sort of equilibrium, you wonder what happened to your family. How do you negotiate a sense of family in this strange new world?

This sudden and profound change of family structure happens to children daily. The likelihood of becoming a member of a stepfamily during one's lifetime increases every year. An estimated one-third of all Americans are members of stepfamilies (Jones, 2003). Demographers predicting that the "stepfamilies will be the most prevalent type of family in the United States by 2010" have been cited as far back as 1996 (Visher & Visher, p. vii). Stepfamilies are here to stay and the special issues they face must be addressed (Coontz, 2005). These statistics make studying the stepfamily a significant undertaking. This study addresses the need to understand how individuals in stepfamilies negotiate a sense of family through symbolic communication.

Research has long focused on the negative results of parental divorce, resulting in a wealth of evidence of its long term negative consequences (Afifi & Keith, 2004; Berger, 1998; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Kapinus, 2005; Lawton & Bures, 2001). Since

many stepfamilies are formed in the wake of divorce, they may be regarded as a second best alternative to a biological family, or not really a family at all. “Individuals who cannot or will not participate in the [societally] favored family form face powerful stigmas and handicaps” (Coontz, 2000, p. 286). Although historically divorce has not been favored as a socially acceptable alternative, it has become “an intrinsic part of the family system” (Furstenberg, 1990, p. 379).

The ability to construct a narrative that creates a “sense of continuity over time” may be part of the process by which identity is developed (Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009, p. 559). Children who grow up in stepfamilies may risk losing an important part of their own identity if they lose the “capacity to keep a particular narrative going” (Giddens, 1991, p. 54). Children need to develop and employ great communication and negotiation skills to keep their own story going in the face of family disruption.

Communication symbolically creates and reproduces shared patterns of behavior and social structures. This process not only provides a way for a family to be constructed by its members, but it also provides a way for members to create a particular family identity. Using existing and symbolic shared rituals, rules, and expectations, a family identity is constructed. “There is no one quick and easy answer to any question surrounding identity, self, and family. But raising the questions of what, who, why, how, and where related to ourselves and to our families is sometimes as important as finding an answer” (Hoffman, 1996, p. 237). This study intends to explain how symbolic communication allows individuals within a stepfamily to construct a unique stepfamily identity in both practice and meaning. More than finding a definition of stepfamily, this

study seeks to understand how a stepfamily identity is created through symbolic communication in the practice of rituals.

### **The Stepfamily**

A stepfamily arrangement may consist of one or more parents and one or more children, some of whom are not related by blood, who live together in a household at least part of the time. The difficulty of defining this family arrangement is evident because of its complex composition. It is not easily reduced to a classical definition (Stewart, 2007; Weigel, 2008). An example of a common stepfamily arrangement may be a father who has married a woman who is not the biological or adoptive mother of his children. Both father and mother may have children from previous relationships. The children may live part of the time with this family and part of the time with another parent and family arrangement. In some stepfamilies, the extended families of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins are shared; in others, these original family bonds are kept separate from the stepfamily members.

The nature of the stepfamily is one of individuals dealing with change. Relationships must be negotiated and renegotiated. Identities must be reconstructed. Belief systems are challenged and new social structures are formed. In many circumstances, the children in stepfamilies are unwilling participants and may challenge the construction of a new family identity. The transition from living with a single dad to living with a dad, a stepmom, and various stepbrothers and stepsisters may be a quick and total change for the child “that is often initiated by the decision of two adults, who wish to join their separate lives together, and children are brought along as a ‘package deal’” (Berger, 1998, p. 45).

This study began by focusing on two-parent households in which each parent has biological children who are not related to the other parent in the household. This common stepfamily arrangement demonstrates a biological relationship and a stepfamily relationship between the participant and the parents. Participants in this study self-identified as stepfamily members who are members of three other types of stepfamilies: (a) families with no stepsiblings—these families include a parent, a stepparent, siblings, and half-siblings; (b) families with no stepsiblings and no half-siblings—these families include a parent, a stepparent, and full siblings; and (c) families with no stepparents and no stepsiblings—these families include parents who were previously married and produced half-siblings to the participant. All four of these family types are included in this study.

When a stepfamily forms after death or divorce, the stepfamily negotiates its own identity as a family through daily interactions and the stories that are told about those interactions; this identity represents a family. Stepfamilies construct identity in similar ways to any type of family. Both positive and negative aspects result. Individuals constantly negotiate meaning in their interactions with each other, and acknowledge that these meanings are created and represented in the stories they tell. Uncovering a new view of stepfamilies as real families may benefit all families. When change occurs, all families face challenges to their identity, whether that change is through the death of a spouse or a child, marriage and the inclusion of in-laws, adoption, divorce, or remarriage. Recognizing that family (of any type) is a negotiated construction of individuals provides an insight into how people create the unique relationship that we call “family.”

### **Significance of Purpose**

The common perception of family in society has predominately focused on the family as biological. Much of the literature prior to the mid-1990s focuses on “documenting problems, conflicts, and difficulties in stepfamilies, including intense painful feelings involved in stepfamily living” (Berger, 1998, p. 5). It is time for these common perceptions to be challenged. The negative results of parental death on a child’s life are obvious. In spite of the myriad of studies documenting negative consequences of parental divorce on children, there is growing evidence that remarriage may result in positive consequences (Ganong & Coleman, 1984; Stoll, Arnaut, Fromme, & Felker-Thayer, 2006). Research seeking a positive outcome will result in the documentation of the sometimes overlooked benefits of parental remarriage (Amato, 2000). While stepfamilies are typically created following a traumatic occurrence such as death or divorce, benefits may result.

These positive results sometimes come in the form of the stepfamily. Rather than focusing on the deficits of stepfamilies, this study places an emphasis on what benefits stepfamilies can have and what positive effects may be found in stepfamily development (Golish, 2003). Society must reconceptualize what a family is in order to maximize these benefits.

Berger (1998) contends that the explosion of research into stepfamilies in the 1980s came with the perspective of “intact families as the desired ‘normal’ model, with other types of families viewed as inferior” (p. 4). Expanding the common understanding of family to include stepfamilies and overcoming the taken-for-granted notion that the

biological family is more real will allow the stepfamily to be viewed with a more realistic viewpoint and may allow the stepfamily to be more highly valued in society.

Stepfamilies do not have to be perceived as an inferior alternative to the traditional family. Adults and children benefit from learning how to negotiate a new sense of family identity within their stepfamilies. This sense of family identity may also potentially create a more secure home life for parents and children in stepfamilies, relieve some of the guilt that parents often feel when raising their children within stepfamilies, and refocus the energy of stepfamilies into more productive family-creating activities. Studying what works for stepfamilies requires understanding and identifying patterns and strengths in functioning stepfamilies, taking the focus off studying only stepfamilies in treatment (Berger, 1998). This study provides a lens for understanding how families navigate dissolution and reconstruction through communication.

Constructing a new identity within a stepfamily is similar to constructing a traditional family identification; however, it has some unique features not present in traditional families. Because stepfamily relationships are frequently created after a difficult time, either because of the death of a parent or the dissolution of a parental relationship, the birth of a stepfamily often results from loss. In spite of the need to grieve the loss of the former family, individuals can still create rewarding new relationships within the stepfamily.

Ultimately, all families are continually changing their identities through communication, thereby challenging our commonplace assumptions that families are solid, fixed entities rather than social arrangements reproduced by negotiation of their participants. "Every family develops its own 'miniculture'. This includes family rules

about ‘our way to do things’ for a wide range of life decisions, from table manners to disciplinary practices, from the nature of family vacations (or even whether the family takes vacations together) to financial strategies, from the typical family menu to priorities in spending money” (Berger, 1998, p. 33). Recognizing that social interaction functions within stepfamilies to construct identity may allow individuals to create rewarding interpersonal relationships within the stepfamily.

Conceptualizing communication as interpersonal interaction allows existing communication structures to be examined. These structures within families emerge as family rituals. Rituals are shared symbolic experiences that family members enact over time and carry meaning within the family. Participation by stepparents in family rituals is seen by children “as a sign of whether they were not seen and treated as ‘real’ children and ‘real’ parents to one another” (Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998, p. 117).

Communication is also conceptualized as a sociocultural interaction as the family interacts within the context of a broader social community. The family’s identity is formed as it is viewed against a backdrop of the larger culture within which it is constructed. Indeed, “as an institution, the American family serves a pivotal role in shaping identity, teaching us who we are in relation to others” (Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001, p. 221).

### **Family Identity**

In order to explicate an understanding of what a family is, we must first consider the basics of personal identity. Personal identity puts the focus on the individual communicator, but because identity is in large part cultural, individuals around the world vary in how they construe themselves (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). Individuals construct

and tell stories to define who they are. Our *narrative identities* begin in adolescence and young adulthood and become “the stories we live by” (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006, p. 4, italics in original). This study focuses on identity as conceptualized, practiced, and storied in the cultural arena of a small northwestern city in America.

Communication theories of identity focus on the mutual influences between communication and identity. These theories assert that identity emerges through social interaction and that it reflects social roles and relations through communication (Jung & Hecht, 2004; Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). Identity is conceptualized as a cognitive function of the individual, but it is also seen as a social reflection. “Thus, communication externalizes identity” (Gundykunst, 2005, p. 262 ). “Identities, or self-reflective images, are created through negotiation whenever we assert, modify, or challenge our own or others’ self-identifications” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 90).

Four frames of identity are labeled by Jung and Hecht (2004) in order to better understand the process of identity creation. These frames of identity are (a) personal (the individual’s self-concept or characteristics), (b) relational (basing one’s identity on how others view him or her, shaping identity as a relationship such as being one’s brother or mother, shaping multiple identities based on relationships such as being both a sister and a teacher, and shaping identity based on a unit of identity such as a couple or a family), (c) enacted (an individual’s performed identity), and (d) communal (beyond the individual, encompassing how individuals identify themselves within larger groups such as society or culture). Conceptualized independently, individuals actually create identity using all four frames concurrently. Though these frames can be analyzed individually, they are all at work at the same time.



“Communication is the means by which identity is established and the mechanism by which it changes as well” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 89). Understanding how identity is negotiated through communication informs this study. One’s identity “is a source of your motivations and expectations in life, and it has staying power – it is enduring. This does not mean that identities, once formed, never change. Rather, while there is a core of stable identity, identity is never fixed but always enduring” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 89). The act of telling the story of one’s own experiences is, in essence, a way of making sense of one’s own identity (Atkinson, 1995). This emerging, negotiated quality of identity aids in understanding the negotiation process between individuals as they construct a family identity.

The structural arrangement of a family may be thought of in terms of biology, with family members being identified as people who are genetically linked or those who are linked by marriage. In this perspective, families are typically thought of as related people who share the same living space. As an example, government census data are accumulated by counting household inhabitants. Because stepchildren live in more than one household, the difficulty of an accurate count by traditional methods is self-evident. Currently, the U.S. Census provides data detailing how many children live with each householder, not how many stepfamilies exist in America. “It is estimated that Census 2000 may have identified only about two-thirds of all stepchildren living with at least one stepparent because of the manner in which the data were collected” (Kreider, 2003, p. 2). Stepfamily therapists, Visser and Visser (1996) cite demographers’ predictions that stepfamilies would become the predominate family structure in the United States by the year 2010.

A transaction definition of families includes examining the functions that people in families accomplish (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004). Within society certain social functions are expected of family members. The raising and socializing of children, maintaining of a household, and contributing financially to the welfare of the members all fall under the category of functional tasks that define a family. Families are expected to work together to provide a reasonable standard of living and function as a group in society. An expectation that parents will provide for the financial needs of their children is demonstrated in the custody and support agreements in the laws of the United States. Also, adult children are often expected to care for the physical needs of their elderly parents (Coontz, 2000).

This transactional definition characterizes the family as a group which shares emotional ties with a shared history and expected future together (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004). A family can be visualized as a group of people who work together through good times and bad over a span of time. The expectation that the family will stick together through events that might dissolve ordinary relationships helps to keep the emotional connectedness concept alive. The phrase “the family that prays together stays together” (Phalen, 2004) demonstrates a societal expectation that families provide the function of religious education of its members. In so doing, the family will continue intact over time.

Though a family may have traditionally been considered a genetic relationship, the way that a family identifies itself is no longer represented simply by a genealogy or family tree. Families are no longer strictly limited to blood or legal ties. Families change over time and through experiences. Families lose members through death, divorce, and disinterest. Families gain members through birth, marriage, and acceptance. Alternative

relationships exist in which a group of people may call themselves a family without genetic or legal bonds.

Given these new realities about family structures, we must take into consideration that a family is made up of individuals, each with a personal story of what it means to be him- or herself. In understanding the identity of a family, we can view the individual self as “not so much a socially responsive entity to be filled or saturated with meaning as it is a social construction that we both assemble and live out as we take up or resist the varied demands of everyday life” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 10).

Some families communicate their unique identity overtly. Driving along a crowded freeway one may notice a set of stickers on the back of the car he or she is following. Upon closer inspection, it is noted that the stickers are a set of silhouettes depicting members of a family. Sometimes even the family dog or cat is caricatured in the sticker family. Each outline has a name underneath and the implied and sometimes stated message is “We are a family.”

Families involved in youth sports may identify themselves as “sporting families.” “Mother, father, and children essentially create a sporting family identity through the sharing, negotiating, and sometimes outright rejection of stories and talk related to sports” (Jacobs, 2007, p. 26). These families wear team uniforms, attend sporting events together, and spend time talking about sports together. “Parents use the word ‘we’ in an attempt to place themselves within those sports experiences. A parent saying ‘I can’t believe we won that game’ demonstrates that they view themselves as part of that team” (Jacobs, 2007, p. 26). Everyday communication about sports constructs a specific family identity.

One of the ways individuals define themselves is through family membership. A child growing up in one home with one or two birth or adoptive parents may have a consistent set of rituals, while a child growing up in one or more stepfamilies may experience many different and possibly conflicting rituals. Religious practices may be radically different, nonexistent, or sometimes opposing from one home to the next and holiday celebrations may be alternated from year to year. Stepfamilies may hesitate to use traditional parental titles. Children may call their stepparent by their first name, while birth children continue to use “Mom” or “Dad.” These communicative acts are part of how the stepfamily is constructed by its members. While family members construct the family identity, the family also constructs the identity of the family members (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008).

Family is a recognized concept, and even further, it is a construct. Challenging the assumptions of what family means, the stepfamily demonstrates how family is more than a concept. It is a theoretical construct manifested in the way that it is formed through communication, rituals, and perhaps, most importantly, choice. In trying to answer the question, “What is a family?” we may turn to the idea that a family is constructed from a patterned set of choices. Over time we begin to function as a “family” by making patterned choices, using the title “family,” and eventually growing our own notions of what “my family” is. Bell (1977) contributes to the idea of structure and pattern providing a sense of coherence:

Common to both [authority and legitimacy] is the idea of coherence, that the meanings, mundane and transcendental, of one’s life experience should cohere in some intelligible pattern. What modernity has done—in its drive to enhance experience, in its repudiation of tradition and the past, in its sanction for the new and the idea that the individual could remake

his self in accordance solely with desire—is to disrupt that coherence in the name of an unbounded self. (p. 251-252)

### **Family Rituals - Celebrations, Routines, and Traditions**

The combination of language and experience often results in rituals. Shared experiences and the stories told about experiences influence people's concept of family (Weigel, 2008). Family rituals communicate identity and closeness within the family. "Meaningful family rituals have been associated with positive outcomes for families and children" (Leon & Jacobvitz, 2003, p. 419). When family members know what to expect each Christmas, or share an inside joke that is consistently perpetrated on the "birthday boy or girl," they develop a type of intimacy. The practice of celebrations, routines, and traditions over time creates the ties that bind families together, creating a family identity. Rituals also develop the emotional atmosphere within a family group. Family closeness, typically conceptualized as a positive quality, may result. Spending time together, celebrating holidays, and practicing rituals continue when a stepfamily is formed, but with some important differences.

In order to define the term "ritual," a number of elements must be considered. Wolin and Bennett (1984) produced seminal research in this area and define rituals as a symbolic way of communicating enacted repeatedly over time. These symbols are assigned meaning by family members. Family rituals are often divided into three categories: celebrations, routines, and traditions (Baxter & Clark, 1996; Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, & Schwagler, 1993; Wolin & Bennett, 1984).

Ritual celebrations include religious and secular holidays; rites of passage such as weddings, funerals, and graduations; and generally accepted cultural celebrations (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). These formal activities mirror those practiced in the particular culture

in which one lives. They often have a familiar format recognizable by most people within the culture.

Routines are patterned informal interactions that happen on a daily basis. These interactions range from greeting behavior in the morning or at the end of the day when the family returns home to nighttime rituals such as reading or telling a story and tucking the children into bed (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). These routines are repeated to the point that they are hardly noticed unless the routine is suddenly stopped. Routines have a habitual nature that gives a structured framework to the family day. An excellent example of routines is family story telling. Telling family stories communicates family identity and helps family members make sense of their family as a unique unit, giving meaning to the activities that happen within the family (Kellas, 2005).

Traditions include typical behaviors linked to ceremonial rites of passage. These traditions are more formal than daily routines and are specific to an individual family (Baxter & Clark, 1996). Examples include the way Grandpa always lights the candles on the birthday cake, the manner in which a particular family chooses where to go on vacation each year, or the way a family always takes a formal portrait at each family reunion.

### Factors of Ritualization

Ritualization may be conceptualized considering the following factors: commitment to continuation, adaptability, creating a framework for meaning, establishing standards for relationships, and continuity in the face of change. First, the choice to continue or neglect to continue rituals faces stepfamilies at the outset. A feeling of family unity may be impeded by neglecting to continue family ritual adaptation and change.

After a break in the family, many family rituals, though continued by the mother, are often changed because of the lack of involvement of the father (Pett, Lang, & Gander, 1992). Some families are relieved to have the opportunity to create new traditions, while others suffer from the feelings of disruption in their family identity (Pett et al., 1992). When ritual observances are contracted (leaving out family members), successful family continuity and coherence is difficult (Whiteside, 1989).

Because rituals can be repeated and are expected, they may provide families the ability to interact in a conflict-free environment (Rosenthal & Marshall, 1988). Families may practice a ritual without addressing an area of conflict. Rituals allow family members to continue functioning in situations of great distress by giving them prescribed activities to perform without the necessity of delving into emotions. By performing an expected norm, individuals are able to distance themselves from an emotional attachment to a ritual, merely performing the ritual within the existing structure. For example, a family may get through a stressful holiday gathering by each member performing his or her usual duties and not “rocking the boat” by questioning the “way we do things.”

Commitment to family rituals impacts the development of family identity and closeness by giving the family a sense of continuity and symbolic connection between the past and the future (Rosenthal & Marshall, 1988). It is important to note that rituals that are repeated reaffirm deep symbolic meanings each time the ritual is practiced. The extent to which a family is committed to participating in rituals may produce more emotional closeness, sometimes called cohesion (Berger, 1998). Families that spend more effort on rituals are shown to place value on the identity of the family. Families that are less committed to rituals do not demonstrate deep symbolic family meaning (Baxter &

Clark, 1996). “Typically, stepfamilies are less cohesive than non-stepfamilies” (Berger, 1998, p. 166).

It is important to note that closeness does not always equal positive feelings. Continually repeated adherence to rituals may result in rigid ritualization, which may contribute to negative patterns (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Bryant, 2006; Leon & Jacobvitz, 2003). A tightening of the family bond may include negative, dramatic results such as families with deep-seated attachment issues, as well as other less dramatic, but equally rigid ritualistic routines (Golish, 2003). These may be demonstrated in families that may be close, but without flexibility in the ability to express individual beliefs, range of emotions, and negotiation (Leon & Jacobvitz, 2003).

Children may also resist stepfamily rituals out of a sense of loyalty to their biological family. “The lower level of cohesiveness is functional for stepfamilies because they need to maintain the balance between openness, to allow crossfamily access to the nonresidential parent, and closure, to achieve a sense of a cohesive stepfamily” (Berger, 1998, p. 166). This resistance may permit a child to feel a sense of loyalty to the original family.

The second factor of ritualizing activities within the family is the adaptability of the family to change. Adaptability keeps the rituals from losing their meaning (Baxter & Clark, 1996). Rituals that are adapted according to the needs and circumstances of the family, without losing the meaning of the rituals, demonstrate the value that is placed on family identity and closeness. A meaningful childhood ritual may include a holiday tradition such as a visit from Santa to the home. As the child(ren) age, this ritual may need to adapt appropriately to accommodate the willingness of the child(ren) to



participate in this particular ritual. Adapting rituals to maintain meaning is demonstrated by families with strong identities.

Routines can change when meaning is added over time; thus, a ritual such as making a “game” out of a routine task, can bring a sense of unity and family identity (Schuck & Bucy, 1997). On the flip side, families that do not adapt to the changing needs of the family hold onto rigid rituals that lose their meaning over time, bringing about a loss of meaning. The importance of adaptation and modification of rituals within families cannot be overstated in order to maintain relevance and meaning (Schuck & Bucy, 1997). “Achieving an adequate familial functional balance requires that stepfamilies have a high degree of flexibility and creativity” (Berger, 1998, p. 166).

While transmission of rituals over generations may be high, rituals must be adapted to reflect social change in the family (Rosenthal & Marshall, 1988). Without adaptation, rituals may lose their symbolism over time. Ritual adaptation is especially important for divorced families as they struggle to accommodate change and create a new identity (Pett et al., 1992). In stepfamilies, holidays require extensive flexibility and creativity as children are required to attend multiple family holiday events. Even a child’s birthday may be recognized and celebrated on multiple days and with various family groupings. The disruption of rituals may result in a disruption in the structure and emotional climate of daily family life (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). Adaptability helps the family become a more balanced system (Kellas, 2005).

A third way that rituals impact family identity and closeness is by providing a framework for meaning in the family. This framework allows family members to know what behaviors are expected and acceptable when they are together. The only significant

predictor of whether or not family rituals are meaningful is a “caring” parenting style (Friedman & Weissbrod, 2004). Caring parents are able to adapt the family rituals to conform to changes in the family’s needs (Friedman & Weissbrod, 2004). It is not simply the practice of rituals that is important, but the meaningfulness of the ritual that gives it value because of the emotion carried with it (Homer, Freeman, Zabriskie, & Eggert, 2007).

The fourth factor to consider is how conversation within family rituals helps to establish standards for relationships (Kellas, 2005). These conversations help to identify the family verbally and define how that family sees itself. The process of jointly telling stories within the family teaches valuable lessons about involvement, turn-taking, and affection (Kellas, 2005).

Family satisfaction and bonding result from joint storytelling within the family (Kellas, 2005). Rituals communicate who is to do what and in what order. Ritual conversations contribute to a family member’s sense of belonging (Nydegger & Mitteness, 1988). When a new member joins a family, the family may retell the old stories in order to give the new member information as to how the family came to be, who plays what role in the family, and what behaviors are appropriate in the family. The new member can then be assimilated into the family and find a place to fit. New stories begin to be told including the new member.

The communication of roles and family identity is accomplished by using rituals (Laird, 1984). Certain dialogues are ritualized to the point of being scripted. These conversations can also contribute to family members’ communication. The script allows a family member to give or hold back information, communicating concern or protecting

one's privacy (Nydegger & Mitteness, 1988). For example, when a child comes home from college a scripted exchange may occur. When following the script, the parent says, "How are you?" followed by the child saying, "I am fine." If the child breaks the script, an opportunity to insert important information occurs. When not breaking the script, the child is able to keep information private without damaging the relationship.

The fifth factor of ritualization demonstrates how the continuity of family rituals creates family identity in the face of change. Whiteside's (1989) study of remarried families shows how patterns of including or excluding potential family members during family rituals contributes to the closeness and the formation of a new family identity. Expanded families within the family identity included relatives from past marriages. Contracted families cut out any prior relationships from their new remarried family. The exclusion or inclusion of extended family members, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins on the stepparent's side of the family, may give a child the opportunity to develop close family bonds with family members beyond the stepparent. These extended family ties may contribute to closeness or cohesion within the stepfamily (Kiser, Bennett, Heston, & Paavola, 2005). Conversely, when one of the biological parents is completely absent, the new family identity may become so strong that the stepfamily becomes more like the original family to the child(ren).

The continuity of the family identity is demonstrated in part by who is not invited to ritual family gatherings (Richlin-Klinsky & Bengtson, 1996). After divorce, some families continue family rituals, but purposely neglect to include certain family members, creating a new family identity without the former members. Children's birthdays may be celebrated twice, once with each parent, rather than a joint birthday celebration.

Grandparents that were highly involved prior to the stepfamily formation, may no longer be invited after the stepparent introduces his or her own parents as stepgrandparents. Including extended family members in rites of passage influences family closeness (Whiteside, 1989). Therefore, including more family members in family rituals increases the likelihood that the family will become more cohesive. Continuous family construction is negotiated through communicative rituals that may include the cultural identity of the newly joining member. This construction expands the family boundaries (Galvin, 2003).

Expanding the family boundaries, such as including new family members in existing rituals, may generate a high level of stress when anticipating special events (Whiteside, 1989). When remarried families face these uncomfortable events and connect their children with their relatives, in spite of the tension and awkwardness, a sense of pleasure can arise when the events turn out to be successful. These events can lead to an increase in feeling normal as a family unit and they contribute to a feeling of family identity.

Incorporating a new set of roles and relationships can be accomplished by using rituals to restore the equilibrium in a family that has been rocked by change through death or divorce (Laird, 1984). Enactment of rituals in families may help family members adapt to change. The events of change, such as a divorce, a child going to college, or a death, can be marked and can establish a new balance in a family through rituals. For example, rites of passage help to define the new status of family members after such a change (Laird, 1984).

Family rituals are powerful tools that communicate identity and closeness (Richlin-Klinsky & Bengtson, 1996). The ties that bind families together over time

include rituals that began generations ago as well as those that were created last week. Celebrations, routines, and traditions practiced over time demonstrate the link between people who have constructed and reaffirmed a family identity and family closeness. Transmitting a family's values to the next generation will result from the continuation and adaptation of family rituals.

### **Family Under Construction**

The stepfamily constantly negotiates its collectively shaped identity and reinterprets the meaning of family. Each individual in the family acts as a free agent—free to choose to be a member in the family and also free to do otherwise. While each individual may create a different interpretation of the family based on the meanings they negotiate from the shared family experience, it is possible to construct a cohesive family through collective negotiation as communicated through rituals.

To begin to answer the question, “How does a stepfamily communicate itself as a family?” consider that reality is dependent upon how it is explained. “The reality in which we live is formed in a system of cultural meanings that make sense of ourselves and our relationship with the phenomenal world” (Anderson, 1996, p. 191). A quantification of the data of stepfamilies cannot explain how stepfamilies negotiate and construct a new family identity. “Identity is an open-ended, dialogical, and narrative engagement with the world, having multiple origins and trajectories” (Raggatt, 2006, p. 32).

Traditional objective empiricism requires looking at the family with a big “T” for truth approach. Families would have to be examined as a static, one dimensional object, rather than a constantly morphing and negotiating identity. Neither will a perceptual

empiricism approach be effective in this study. The requirement that human truth exists and can be perceived differently does not allow for an understanding of the family identity through participation.

Stepfamilies are especially good examples of how individuals perceive truth differently. Each member brings with him or her unique views of the meaning of the family. From each vantage point multiple truths emerge. Each family member participates individually in order to construct the whole. Each member tells a different story about what the family is. The family is really what each member says it is.

From the hermeneutic perspective the reality of the stepfamily is a “polysemic system of meanings that must be centered in improvised performances of both discourse (language in use) and action” (Anderson, 1996, p. 191). These performances are comprised of the recollection of observations and small everyday acts and discourse of the participants, as given meaning through stories. These meanings are created in everyday activities as mundane as daily greeting behavior and meal time rituals or as complex as holiday celebrations and family reunions. As people interact, they use language and action to create a shared reality.

From the social construction viewpoint, the collectively agreed upon truths of the family, as interpreted by individuals through stories, must be analyzed and interpreted. Meaning is created through language use and is dependent on cultural membership. Looking at the family’s experience, it is clear that each individual in the family has a different perspective on what is meaningful. Each family member participates individually in small everyday actions. Therefore, the family is a collection of multiple

truths revealed in stories and the resulting world of the family is greater than the truths told from any one particular vantage point.

The social constructionist perspective recognizes that human behavior needs interpretation because of its symbolic nature. Exploring family identities from this perspective necessitates more than a simple documentation of behavior. It also requires an interpretation of that behavior. Observations require attention to the subjective experience of the participant. Thus, by listening to the stories participants tell about their families, rather than observing the families in action directly, analysts use “personal narratives as windows into the lived experience of the narrators and try to achieve empathic understanding of that experience” (Bernard & Ryan, 2010).

The researcher’s attitude of acceptance and understanding is greater than those who are not sensitized to the subject matter. Bringing one’s own awareness of the subject matter also requires an acknowledgment of personal biases and intentions, as well as a willingness to set them aside as much as possible (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Preconceived notions influence the way the research is conceived and should be used to bring a deeper understanding to the study. “That one works to center a claim establishes a line of responsibility for what can be done with it” (Anderson, 1996, p. 191). The researcher’s imperative duty, then, is “bracketing” or setting aside his or her taken-for-granted orientation in order to “see the *process* by which social reality becomes real for its adherents, in order to view, among other things, the language of the self being put to work to provide identity with substance and form” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 86, italics in original).

The manner of engagement requires the presence of the researcher as well as “participation as a qualification for interpretation” (Anderson, 1996, p. 134). In the case of studying stepfamily relationships, the story of the family is collected from individual family members who share their family narratives. Narration implies that “people judge the stories that are told for and about them and that they have a rational capacity to make such judgments” (Fisher, 1987, p. 67). Discourse and action must be analyzed in order to interpret the shared meanings and values of the family members. The interview process includes asking questions, documenting answers, and describing and interpreting the findings. In this process, the participants’ narrations allow them to tell their own stories, selecting what is personally meaningful in their participation regarding the negotiated meaning of their family. Through telling their stories, participants construct reality. The “language of the self [is] being put to work to provide identity with substance and form” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 86). It is as though telling the story makes it more real.

The researcher must be an actor and an interpreter in the world of the participants. Objective acts do not have meaning within themselves (Anderson, 1996). Thus, theory and method overlap as the study is also creative in nature. “Hermeneutic science would hold that truth is a human accomplishment within the semiotic domain” (Anderson, 1996, p. 136). Using this perspective to study stepfamilies requires conversations with individuals in stepfamilies, listening to individual’s stories, and bringing theory and method together to interpret the meaning in their experiences.

As meanings are pieced together through the interpretations of participants, understanding begins to form the practical argument. The researcher becomes the agent in this process and keeps the process of scholarship “in the present instead of predicting



the future; attends to actual actors instead of attributes or paradigmatic elements like character or role; and shifts our arguments from rates to critical instances” (Anderson, 1996, p. 180). These critical instances persuade based on the strength of the social values they advance. The practical argument cannot be won or lost because it is right or wrong, but it persuades because of the values it claims.

Meaningful claims require action. Using a hermeneutic empiricism perspective to study stepfamilies assumes that some value is attached to the study itself. The intentions of the researcher begin the values process. Beyond observation, the researcher also seeks to find value in the research with an eye to making some kind of social difference. Anderson (1996) posits that “the claimant must necessarily provoke change, even if nowhere else but in the claimant” (p. 137). Studying stepfamilies necessitates that the researcher acknowledges awareness of his or her own experiences and how they influence the research, while becoming a participant in the experiences of others.

Asking questions about the system of values upon which a family bases its identity will lead to a deeper understanding of the values taken for granted by stepfamilies in their everyday performances of communication. It’s likely that uncovering a stepfamily’s core values will reveal the underlying values upon which an identity is built. These questions about values will assist in finding a clearer understanding of why a stepfamily identifies itself as a family, discovering the internal valuing systems that influence the perceptions, decisions, and actions of the family members (Hartman, 1999).

The philosophical viewpoint of this study makes some general assumptions about the nature of the individual. “Hermeneutic theories generally argue that the self appears in relation to some other, both in identity and subjectivity” (Anderson, 1996, p. 135).

Individuals are defined by the practice of being in particular relationships—the self is a socially created being. As the interview process coaxes out narratives about how the family identity has been created, it also helps to define the interviewee. Each individual within a stepfamily brings a unique history and perspective to the collectively shaped family whole.

Individual family members have conceptions of their own identity. These are combined with an identity that is reflected from those who surround him or her. Both the individual viewpoint of self and the socially reflected view of self create the completed identity of the self. The move from the identity of the self being seen *in* relationship to the self existing *as* relationship demonstrates this difference (Anderson, 1996).

The claims made about the identity of the family are also influenced by hermeneutic assumptions that the competent claim is “gained in the practice of lived experience” (Anderson, 1996, p. 178). In order to justify his or her argument, a researcher must be able to establish authentic authority. In order to gain authenticity, the researcher must be a legitimate participant and sometimes mask the interests of the research. After doing the work of gaining authority, the researcher must “manage the performance by stepping in and out of authority and revealing and masking subjectivity” (Anderson, 1996, p. 137). This balancing act provides the conditions to believe the argument is true.

## CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

### **Interpretive Inquiry**

The overall design of this study reflects the qualitative interpretive inquiry tradition (Craig & Muller, 2007; Cresswell, 1994; Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). Using qualitative methods provides the opportunity to “listen to informants and to build a picture based on their ideas” (Cresswell, 1994, p. 21). Using current literature as an introduction to set the stage for understanding, narrative interviews gather and explore the interpretations of the participants. The open-ended, exploratory approach uncovers what is “believed to be important to the study and about which little is known” (Schensul et al., 1999, p. 121).

Human communication can be differentiated from physical and natural sciences because of the ability of humans to act based on some understanding of what they are doing. It can be argued that interpreting the meanings of our actions and the actions of others creates life in human society as we know it. “The purpose of interpretive inquiry is to broaden and deepen our understanding of social life by interpreting the specific meanings that are shared . . .” (Craig & Muller, 2007, p. 57).

#### Why Stories?

The nature of human beings as storytellers has long been extolled by Walter Fisher (1984, 1987). We tell stories to enhance our experience and to share our experience. “We need stories, visual and verbal, fiction and nonfiction. His/story or her/story, person’s stories are all part of discovering who and where we are; where we’ve

come from; and where we are going, individually and collectively” (Hoffman, 1996, p. xix). Through storytelling, our identities become clearer to ourselves and to others and we construct meanings about the world around us (Atkinson, 1995; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Singer, 2004). Stories provide insight into the sense of family present or absent within the stepfamily. “People see storytelling as a powerful part of constituting family climate” (Kellas, 2005, p. 386). Additionally, individuals use narration to make sense of difficult experiences (Trees & Kellas, 2009). Consequently, narration as a genre creates the framework for gathering data in this study. Collecting family stories gives valuable insight into the way people communicate their sense of family identity.

Atkinson’s (1998) “life story interview” provides the basis for the approach taken in the interview process. Although compiling a complete life story or grand narrative is not the objective of this study, Atkinson’s approach provides a strategy for gathering the life story of a stepfamily through the eyes of an individual. Using a combination of interviews, during which participants are free to share their own stepfamily story, and a coding process in which themes are identified, links are made to the theoretical models previously described (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

The importance of hearing the voices of the participants in their own words and in the manner they choose to tell their stories cannot be overemphasized (Atkinson, 1998). The ritual stories participants choose to tell indicate how they perceive the process of creating a family identity to be working. As participants select particular stories to tell about their stepfamilies, a sense of understanding is negotiated between storyteller and listener about how the stepfamily was constructed and continues to evolve.

Each member of a family has a unique perception or story of the inner workings of his or her family. These perceptions are fluid and may change at different times the same story is told. Selecting which life story to tell, the storyteller may require “a *conversation of narrators*” choosing “one story from a number of possibilities” (Raggatt, 2006, p. 15, italics in original). How individuals interpret what is happening within their experience is taken into consideration “rather than assuming that members share meanings and definitions of themselves and their situations” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 88). These perceptions are unrecognizable to a researcher through mere observation of phenomena. Watching and documenting family rituals will not provide understanding about how the family member perceives the ritual to affect his or her sense of family. Stories allow the researcher to “document how members themselves use theory (or philosophy, or methodology, for that matter) . . . . Applied to the self, this becomes an analytics of the everyday interactional processes of self construction.” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 90). This type of research is “*approached* scientifically, but it is primarily *carried out* as an art” (Atkinson, 1998, p. 21, italics in original).

### The Stepfamily Experience

The phenomenon under investigation is the experience of living within a stepfamily. Each individual has a unique window into this world. Being able to “suspend belief in the real in order to bring into view the everyday practices by which events, objects, and subjects come to have a sense of being real for members of society” provides the basis of inquiry (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 97).

The inquiry process followed six steps (Bernard & Ryan, 2010, p. 259): (1) I identified stories about stepfamily life as evidenced in rituals as the phenomenon under

investigation and made it my goal to understand their essence; (2) I identified my own biases as a stepchild and stepparent, and acknowledging my own unique historical perspective attempted to put them aside; (3) I collected narratives about stepfamily life from adults who have experienced living in them; asked a good, open-ended question, and then prompted the participant to expand upon their initial answer; (4) Using intuition informed by theoretical knowledge (after an honest effort to recognize and set aside biases), I identified the essentials of stories about stepfamily rituals; (5) I laid out these essentials in writing with exemplary quotes from the narratives; (6) I repeated steps 4 and 5 until I was satisfied with what was learned about the lived experience of the participants, realizing more “truths” might be available.

### **Methodology Justification**

Using the life story interview enables a deeper understanding of how participants understand their world (Atkinson, 1995, 1998). “The life story interview is designed to help the storyteller, the listener, the reader, and the scholar to understand better how life stories serve four functions of bringing us more into accord with ourselves (psychological), others (sociological), the mystery of life (spiritual), and the universe around us (philosophical)” (Atkinson, 2007, p. 225). Understanding the experiences of participants requires attentive listening to their voices as they tell their own stories.

Using narrative inquiry allows me to pay attention to understanding and interpreting individual viewpoints. People tell stories as “a way of knowing, understanding, and explaining their lives” (Keyton, 2006, p. 282). In this research study, verbal and textual narratives are studied in order to explore the relationship of symbolic communication and identity formation.

Qualitative research moves away from collecting and categorizing data in numeric form and instead focuses on description as data. Four turns complete the move from quantitative analysis to narrative inquiry: “the attention to relationships among participants, the move to words as data, the focus on the particular, and the recognition of blurred genres of knowing” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 3). In this case, I am a participant in the co-construction of the stories and I attempt to “draw the readers’ attention to the most compelling parts of the story” (Keyton, 2006, p. 284).

Discovering the compelling parts of the story occurs by listening to people’s stories in a deeper way than can be done by simple external observations of family interactions. The stories reveal the intimate meanings perceived by participants as they construct and tell the stories of their stepfamilies. “The story of the story, the personal narrative becomes a personal object to be explored and discussed. The narrative becomes a parallel and equal process which aids in the analysis of a life’s significance to both the teller and the person listening to ‘the tellings’” (Miller, 1997, p. 228).

The methodological choice of narrative interviews lends itself to the collection of data based on: “. . . opinions, feelings, and experiences, sensitive issues, and privileged information” (Denscombe, 2007, p. 175). Additionally, interviews allow me to understand the participant’s point of view. “Interviews are particularly well suited to understand the social actor’s experience and perspective” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 173). While the process is not strictly structured, similar questions are used in each session to uncover information within the general topic area. Being adept at communication skills, as well as having a strong theoretical and contextual knowledge bolsters the data gathering process (Keyton, 2006).

The use of a life story interview approach serves as the data collection methodology. Following Atkinson's (2007) method, personal stories are "examined to see how they bring us more into accord with the universe around us and to experience how subjective accounts of one's life often contain a personal worldview, a personal philosophy, a personal value system, a personal ideology, and a view of what is morally, if not politically, correct – in other words, how life is to be lived" (p. 229). While this particular study does not take into account the participants' entire life story, the approach used by Atkinson to study the life story is adapted and applied to the more limited life story of the stepfamily.

### Participants

Twenty adults, who describe themselves as children of stepfamilies, participated in the research. All of the participants came from unique families and did not share any family connections with each other, biological or otherwise. Volunteer participants were recruited from undergraduate classes at a northwestern university. Using a handout [Appendix B] to describe the study in detail, a direct appeal was made in five different communication classrooms. Additionally, an appeal was made to instructors to invite their communication students to participate. The same informational handouts were provided to instructors for distribution to students. Volunteers signed a consent form [Appendix C] and participated without the expectation of compensation. Benefits to each participant included having an audience to listen to his or her story and making a contribution to a scholarly study.

I made the decision not to base the sample on procedures of random probability "because social phenomena are studied for their unique qualities, the question of whether



they are normally distributed in a population is not an issue” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 122). It is not the objective of this study to understand the particular family system by interviewing each member. The objective is to understand how any one individual in a family perceives the stepfamily. Indeed, each child in a stepfamily could be interviewed, with different results, because of the unique way each person in a family perceives the experiences of a family. The goal is to listen to an individual’s perception in story form about that individual’s family.

Participants in this study are individuals from stepfamilies living together for at least five years, beginning when the participants were between the ages of 0 – 18. Research indicates that it takes four to seven years for a stepfamily to move through the emotional stages experienced by stepfamily members as they move toward family identity (Papernow, 1993). The experiences of these stepchildren give them specific “knowledge and/or expertise, that are important to the research questions” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 121). The sample allows for exploring the stepfamily’s creation and recreation of rituals over time because the participants have intimate knowledge over time from their personal experiences.

The sample of nine females and eleven males range in age from 18 to 45. The ages parse out as follows: three 18-year-olds, six 19-year olds, five 20-year-olds, and one each of 21, 23, 26, 28, 29, and 45. Participants fall into four general stepfamily categories: Group A (10), Children with parents, stepparents, stepsiblings, and may have half-siblings; Group B (4), Children with parents, stepparents, and half-siblings, but no stepsiblings; Group C (4), Children with parents, stepparents, and full siblings, but no

half- or stepsiblings; and Group D (2), Children with parents, no stepparents, and half-siblings, but no stepsiblings.

The origins of participants' stepfamilies range from before-they-can-remember up to age 17. Five participants either did not remember or chose not to tell about when their biological parents split up. Those who told how old they were when their parents were divorced were 2, 2, 4, 4, 5, 5, 6, 7, 8, 13, and 15-years-old, at that time. The two participants whose mothers died prior to their father's remarriage were 2 and 17-years-old, respectively. Two participants consider themselves members of stepfamilies even though their biological parents are still married, because they had been married and had children previously, providing the participant with half-siblings.

### Procedures

Adult stepfamily members met with me in person at a data collection session in my professional work space. Beginning with an orientation process designed to explain that the study focused on stepfamily identity, participants were assured that specific personal information, such as names and locations, would be anonymously preserved and remain confidential. The importance of building rapport and eliciting talk by active listening was my primary focus in the introduction phase (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Participants told their stories within a time frame of 14 to 60 minutes. The interview framework [Appendix A] began with introductions, followed by context questions, in order to provide understanding about the context of the interactions in the family. The main question asked of every participant was "Tell me the story of your stepfamily." This open-ended question was followed up with probing questions only when necessary, allowing the participant to "run with it" (Bernard & Ryan, 2010, p. 259).

I attempted to “get out of the way” of the participant, allowing the storyteller to tell the story in his or her own way (Bernard & Ryan, 2010, p. 248). Rather than a dialogue, I engaged in prolonged active listening using only occasional questions as prompts to encourage the storytelling process [Appendix A]. All questions were not asked of every participant, but were selectively used when necessary, to aid in the storytelling process.

The purpose of these interviews was to discover the ways in which participants told the story of their own family. Attention was given to how symbolic communication in the form of rituals was used to construct a sense of family identity. Rituals were generally defined as celebrations, routines, and traditions. The life story interview approach taken in this study included (a) preparing for the interview process by becoming aware of the value of the life story, (b) crafting helpful questions to prompt the storyteller during the actual interview, and (c) transcribing and interpreting the interview (Atkinson, 1998).

The storytelling process allowed the participants to frame their own recollections and perceptions in the form of a story. This process furnished a powerful method of “construction, witnessing, and dialogue” that facilitated a sense of understanding between researcher and participant (Miller, 1997, p. 267). The collaborative work involved in this process allowed me to work with the participant in an effort to create a jointly told story. As Miller describes the process, “The beginning of shared meaning opened the door to a deeper sense of integrity within the process” (Miller, 1997, p. 267).

### Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed, resulting in more than 200 double-spaced pages of text for analysis. Gaining meaning from the story was the responsibility of both the

storyteller and the interviewer (Atkinson, 1998). As the interviews took place, some give-and-take occurred allowing for clarification and enhancement of the story by the participant. During the transcription process, I eliminated my own voice, resulting in the participant's story (Atkinson, 1998). Pseudonyms were assigned to each respondent and family member to protect the privacy of participants, while retaining the feel of the voice of a real person.

Starting analysis with Atkinson's (1998) life story framework, connections and contrasts among the collected data were made, recognizing recurrent themes of meaning (Denscombe, 2007). "Themes come from both the data (an inductive approach) and from the investigator's prior theoretical understanding of the phenomenon being studied" (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 88). Recognizing the value of my own point of view as both central to interpretation and evaluation of the data, and also needing to be set aside so as not to interpret the data through a particular cultural lens; I attempted to portray an accurate interpretation of each participant's story and what was meaningful to them.

Multiple truths are revealed "in the moment" and I took on the viewpoint of the individual family member in order to comprehend the whole (Anderson, 1996). As I identified symbolic communication within the family, as told by the participant, I used my own "now-fresh (after bracketing) intuition to identify the essentials of the phenomenon" (Bernard & Ryan, 2010, p. 259). The results tell the story of being there (Anderson, 1996).

"Interpretation has everything to do with meaning and validity" in the life story interview approach (Atkinson, 1998, p. 58). In this case, discovering meaning within the story was done on an individual level by paying attention to both my theoretical

perspective and experiential frame of reference and subjective perspective (Atkinson, 1998). Each story can be read by different researchers with different results that may not be replicable. “A life story interview is a highly personal encounter; an analysis of a life story is highly subjective and may have as much to do with the quality and depth of the interpersonal exchange itself as with any theory that might be applied to the content of the narrative” (Atkinson, 1998, p. 59). My main goal was to understand the lived experience of the participants (Bernard & Ryan, 2010).

In addition to the subjective meaning interpreted in each individual narrative, I also examined the narratives to discover themes. Scrutinizing the stories, I discovered symbolic communication in the form of rituals, which offered interpersonal relationships between family members that were subsequently accepted or rejected. Additionally, I found negative and positive portrayals of stepparents and biological parents and sought to understand the essence of the meaning of these relationships against the backdrop of theory-related material. “After the initial pawing and marking of text, cutting and sorting involves identifying quotes or expressions that seem somehow important and then arranging the quotes/expressions into piles of things that go together” (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 94). The cutting and sorting process resulted in a wealth of raw data and meaningful quotes.

Using these techniques allowed a construction of the qualitative meaning of each life story, as well as a comparison among texts to further understand the meaning of the stories as a group. Applying theoretical background was critical to more fully comprehend what the stories revealed about stepfamily communication.

### CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS

Typical of stories told around the world, the stories collected in this study contain a beginning, middle, and an end (Atkinson, 1998). Beginnings vary among participants, but fit into two general categories, with either a recitation of the negative event that opened the door for a stepfamily to begin, or a neutral sentence stating the facts of the storyteller's situation. Middles include stories about relationships with siblings, parents, and extended family members. These middles involve situations cast as positive, negative, or somewhere in between. Endings include a variety of summations metaphorically wrapping up the story. Additionally, as the inductive data analysis process was followed, it became clear that a central feature of how the stories were told was the timing of the tale.

#### **The Beginnings: Once Upon a Time . . .**

Starting with the beginning of each story, a raw honesty and openness was common among the participants. While a certain level of rapport was previously established with eleven of the participants because of their prior teacher-student relationship with me, it was surprising how open and frank all of the participants were when recounting their family stories. Each participant was invited to "tell me the story of your stepfamily." This request was accompanied by a suggestion that it might be helpful to describe the composition of the family, such as parents, siblings, etc. The participants were unemotional and quick to respond directly with specific details. The facts were typically unmitigated by historical context.

No stories began with an overtly positive statement such as might be found at the beginning of a happy story. The participants chose either a negative background to craft their stories or a neutral opening. In about one-half of the stories, participants cited the negative event of death or divorce that made way for the beginning of the stepfamily. The following statements are typical of the first lines in each of these storytelling sessions (participants are identified by pseudonym):

Well, when I was in high school, my mother passed away. (Nate)

My mother died when I was about two. (Evan)

My parents got divorced when I was five. (Anna)

My mom and dad, well, first my dad got married to somebody else and then got a divorce. (Delia)

When I was in first grade, my parents got a divorce because my dad had cheated on my mom. (Lina)

When I was about nine, my parents, I guess they separated. (Daniel)

My dad got a lady pregnant when he was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, a freshman in high school. (Jon)

In ours, the stepfamily part's been broken. (Lucas)

I was born 1990 and then I don't know when exactly my real father and my mom separated. (Barry)

The first words of the participants were not crafted to mask the adversities within their narratives. No attempts were made to soften the stark realities of death or divorce. Each of these participants casually told it as he or she remembered it or the way it was remembered as a family story told to each of them. While the recitation of the negative event that began the stepfamily was common in just over one-half of the stories, several participants began with a more neutral statement, such as:

My stepfamily began January-ish of 1991. (James)

My mom got married to my stepdad when I was nine. (Kimberly)

I have two stepfamilies, then, because both of my parents remarried.  
(Sally)

I have two younger brothers, one is 19 now and the other is 17, will turn 18 in May. (Tim)

I was born in Los Angeles, CA and this was in 1990 and my mom was with my real dad at the time. (Randy)

I grew up. I was born the oldest child in a three child home. (Paul)

I have my mom and my dad, obviously. (Ellie)

The beginnings provided no clues as to how the stories would end. Beginning with a negative or neutral statement did not predict either the ending or the overall essence of the story. In fact, most (11) of the stories were predominately positive in their portrayals of the stepfamily experience. Three stories told tales of mixed or negative feelings for one side of their stepfamily and positive feelings for the other side of their stepfamily. Another told of mixed feelings for the one stepfamily he experienced. Only five stories were decidedly negative toward their stepfamily experience.

### **The Middles: Muddles**

Atkinson (1998) names the middle of the story, this troublesome part of the story, “a muddle.”

A muddle is when things don't go smoothly. It is when things involve conflict, chaos, or disorder. Conflict creates the plot of a story. There could be no plot, plan of action, intrigue, or drama to the story, without a muddle of some sort. Stories go from order to disorder to order. This is the pattern that is repeated over and over. (p. 26)

This is the place where the action happens, where conflicts are presented, and where resolutions are found. A lot happened in the muddles of these stories. Many rituals



were storied in this study, but the ones that caught my attention were those created specifically between stepparent and child. These rituals appear to primarily be a way for stepparents to offer a relationship and provide children a way to accept the relationship. Most participants told stories of how a stepparent offered a relationship and then explained their own acceptance or rejection of the offer. In some stories, children appeared to be the initiators of the relationship, and the accept/reject part of the interchange was left to the stepparent. Others told stories of their own acceptance of the stepparent in contrast to a sibling's rejection of the stepparent. And still others told of the offer/accept relationship in regards to stepsiblings and extended family members.

#### No Offer of Relationship

I was surprised by the stories that portrayed the stepparent as not even offering a relationship to the child. Lucas described his stepmom's lack of an offer to participate in the family this way, "Stepmom intentionally segregated herself." He described conflict with his stepmom as "explosive" and explained that "it's kind of something annoying that I've just learned to live with. I don't really feel any emotions about it. I've just learned to live with it. She does these things. It has no lasting effect. Then it goes by the wayside. I just ignore her." He took her self-imposed exile to mean that she did not offer a relationship with him. "We all go off by ourselves. My stepmom doesn't really want anything to do with anyone." Anna also described a lack of offer from both of her stepparents. "Both my stepmom and my stepdad were just not very nice to us."

Lina described her stepmom's lack of an offer of relationship this way: "My stepmom didn't invite us [to family gatherings]." In one story of a family gathering on her stepmom's side of the family, Lina tells about how she found out that her mom was

being discussed resulting in some negative things being said about her. She took it personally and explained, “I think that’s why we’re not really that close and I never really felt like my stepmom’s parents really accepted us, like really accepted me and my little sister as part of the family.” She described this negative treatment in contrast with how her dad’s side of the family goes “out of their way” to include her stepbrothers.

Randy told about his negative relationship with his stepdad:

My stepdad was very strict. He had certain things that he thought and he was just a very stubborn, unyielding person. If you didn’t follow his rules or if you didn’t do what he said, he would come down on you. I never really felt close to him.

Randy described various instances in which his stepdad disciplined him, gave him the silent treatment, and solved conflict by letting Randy know, “I’m the boss and you’re going to have to do what I say or you’re not going to be living here anymore.” Randy summed up their lack of closeness by describing his stepdad’s lack of an offer of relationship, “Maybe I’m a bad kid, but I never really felt like he ever tried to reach out to me, tried to make me happy. It was more about making himself happy.”

According to Braithwaite et al. (1998), rituals fail when they are “imposed from the old or new family without other member’s input or consent and members felt forced to participate” (p. 113). Randy’s story shows how his stepdad’s banning of holiday celebrations from the original family created a routine of fake acceptance, but an unwillingness to genuinely accept the stepfamily.

My mom always tried to do something special on my birthday or on Christmas, but my stepdad was really strict and he didn’t allow any sort of celebrating of holidays. In his religion they are somewhat pagan or something . . . . Even back then I knew I was only abiding by his rules in order to make him and my mom happy, but I always knew that as soon as I was free to do my own thing, I wasn’t going to stay in that sort of

religious circle, I guess. As soon as I could I stopped going to that church and basically started trying to be a normal person, I guess.

### Accepted Offers

The offer of a relationship originating from a stepparent was a more common theme and carried a special meaning to many participants. Lina told how at the beginning of her relationship with her stepdad, he “would always say, ‘No, you call me your home-dad.’ He hated the word ‘step.’ You know, we’re his kids.” Lina’s acceptance of her stepdad’s offer of relationship goes so far as to have her express her wish to call her stepdad “Dad.” Barry describes his stepdad’s offer of relationship similarly. “He’s very adventurous. He likes to just go out and do stuff and he’s always taken me with him.”

Joining in simple activities and even demonstrating willingness to participate in the way the family had been functioning before became offers to the participants. “I always liked my stepmom, even before they got married. She kind of came into our house and kind of assimilated to what we were used to, so I think that was why it was easier. She brought some good stuff into the house, but for the most part she just sort of did what we were already doing” (Brenda). Marie explains how she and her adopted dad shared their own special ritual: “My [adopted] dad’s really, really smart, so he would do homework with me. And we always watch *Jeopardy*. My mom wouldn’t watch it. Me and my dad would always watch *Jeopardy* every single night.”

The everyday routines shared between stepparent and child demonstrate how this offer and accept relationship results in shared rituals. “My stepdad, we hang out all the time, like we’ll go to dinner or something when my mom is out of town. We’re going to the Fiesta Bowl. We do vacations together” (Delia). James tells how his stepdad offered him a relationship, “He was really good about after they’d been dating a while and just

take me out. And we'd go just do whatever. I'd go to work with him or whatever, stuff like that. I think that that was really important for us to connect. I didn't even realize how wise he was at the time." Kimberly shows how her stepdad's interest in participating in everyday activities demonstrated his offer of a relationship to her.

So when he came along, he just introduced me to different things. He's really into computers so he would help me out with that and get me interested in those type of things. He taught me how to ride my bike . . . . I really liked that and I feel that he did listen and he did care. I remember this one day I was having this really bad day because people were picking on me because I changed schools in the fifth grade. And so, he got me this little toy car and wrote me a letter about how I shouldn't have to change, and I'm great the way I was. I'm like "Oh cool! He thinks I'm great!" It was just really cool. I've always really liked him for that.

One offer/accept ritual is the "inside joke." An example is the Christmas gift ritual shared by Edward and his stepdad:

As far as presents go, we'll always joke. He gave me a joke album from Kenny G, because it was kind of like the joke kind of thing because it was kind of funny around Christmas. So he gave me a \$1.89 Kenny G CD. And I regifted it and gave it back to him one year. We have gifts going. He gave me an old dirty flute "signed" by Kenny G. I gave him a Jeff Gordon card and a Yanni CD. It kind of goes back and forth. I went to the thrift store and I got one of those kind of dirty gross looking sweaters that had a gross looking ram stitched on the front. It was like super tight. I wrapped it up. It was a Nebraska hat for the real gift. It was kind of a funny joke. It's a healthy relationship, I would say.

Brenda also told stories about funny Christmas traditions with her stepmom. "We kind of joke about the people in our family . . . like my stepmom's obsession with Christmas or how when we sit down to play a game as a family, my stepmom was always very like 'by the rules,' like you couldn't stray outside the rules!" The ability to share an inside joke requires both parties to offer and accept the relationship each time the joke is revisited. Either side has the ability to reject the offer by not participating in the joke the next time it is offered.

Even a negative ritual can succeed when both parties agree to participate. Tim described an ongoing ritual interaction he has with his stepmom when they are angry that demonstrates successful symbolic communication.

Julie had this thing with her sisters where if she has a comment and you know she has a comment, she goes like this [finger to side of nose] and she looks at you. She's not going to say, but you know what she's going to say. And it pisses you off even more. And then she just walks away. I know what you're going to say. It makes me mad that you won't even say it. I'm just going to go like this. It's knowledge. It doesn't have to be said. It's the knowledge that it's in the mind that will get you.

Giving each other pet names demonstrates the routine way in which one stepparent and child symbolically offer and accept their continued relationship. "I never thought of him as a dad, just a really close friend. But when I got to an age where I really found him fascinating, we had this thing where he's calling me 'Dufus' and I'm calling him 'Dork.' I've never really called him 'Dad' to his face, or stepdad; I've always called him 'Dork'" (Kimberly).

#### Offers from Children

Only two participants told stories of themselves as children making the offer to a stepparent. Anna tells about "when they first got married, my mom and my stepdad, we asked my dad, 'Can we call him dad?' And he said, 'Yeah.' But we never did it." Katie also recalls her mother telling about her offer to her stepdad, "You're the one who asked him to be your dad. How could I turn him down after that?"

#### Rejected Offers

Rejected offers equaled the number of offers accepted. While Paul's relationship with his stepdad is cordial and his stepdad has offered a relationship, he described a barrier that keeps them from forming a family relationship:

There's a lot of things that we like about Ed [stepdad], but it's the whole fact that Ed's partly responsible for what happened between my parents is kind of what we have that we can never trust him. I think it would be very hard for us to ever come to that trusting emotion because of that . . . . That's the biggest barrier that I don't think we're ever going to be able to get past. It might fall to the back of our minds more and more and become less of an issue, but I don't ever see that not being an issue between me and my brother, at least, and Ed.

Nate also explains how his stepmother offered a relationship that he did not accept at the time, but much later has changed his mind about having a relationship with her.

I can't say that I took a shine to her right away, but I kind of looked at it if my dad was happy I eventually would be. . . . I still can't say that she's my mom, but I've gotten to where I can say, yeah that's my stepmom, instead of my father's wife. . . . It's not like we hate each other. We're different people. That's the way it is. It did not feel like family. It was always kind of weird. I know they tried to make it more of a family unit, and maybe with my sisters and them it was a little bit more. But to me it was always a bit strange.

Some participants also told stories of their own acceptance of a stepparent's offer in contrast to a sibling's rejection of a similar offer. Following Kimberly's description of her acceptance of her stepdad, she tells the story of her sister's rejection of his offers.

My older sister, she's five years older than me, so she was 14 at the time. She was one of those cranky teenagers so, their relationship was a little more rocky than mine and my dad's was, or stepdad's was. . . . When my sister got to be older, about 17 or 18, she started always eating in her room. And that's when their relationship really got rocky between the two of them, just because he didn't like that at all . . . . I mean they've had good moments together, but they've just never been as close. . . . I am the younger one and I do have a lot more respect and liking toward my dad than my sister does. She loves him and she does like him, but they just have a lot more problems.

Barry also contrasts his own close relationship with his stepdad to his sister's refusal to accept a close relationship with him.

She was kind of connected to my dad so she never really accepted my stepfather for a father, but I always have. . . . My sister never really connected with him [stepdad]. I mean they're better now. She kind of hated him always. She was really hard to get a long with. She was pretty bad. Because she would always say I was always so spoiled because I got to go do everything, but she didn't want to do those things so it was kind of hard to balance that out too. . . . So, see I always thought he was a cool guy. Yeah, he's a race car driver. Ever since then he's done things for me so he was just my dad. My sister, like I said, she just didn't want anything to do with him.

### Extended Family Offers

Stepparent offers of relationship are not the only ways that children construct a stepfamily identity. Many stories were told about stepsiblings and more distant stepfamily relationships such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins who were brought into the family because of the stepparent. "My stepsisters would play Barbies with me and they would make the effort to do stuff with me. When they drove, they would take me to ice cream and stuff. I feel like they really made the effort when I was younger" (Marie). "It was always nice though, because I loved my stepsister. Hanging out with her, she's like a real sister to me because she always stuck up for me, because her mom was a little crazy sometimes" (Sally).

The stepsibling relationships described in the stories were predominantly positive in nature. To be sure, negative relationships existed, but the ones typically storied told of acceptance and mutuality. "They did some stuff with us, teasing that older brothers do, but it wasn't the same kind of activities that I would have done. As far as like people had kind of different attitudes and activities that maybe they did in school. But at family events it still just kind of meshed really well" (Evan). Even Lucas, whose stories were predominantly negative, described his stepsibling relationship as "the most normal family relationship I have."

Edward, who characterized his stepfamily in very open and accepting terms, felt his stepbrother was a friend.

We were good friends, so that was good. It was more like a friend thing than a brother thing for a good part. It was kind of brotherly in some ways. We'd mess with each other and get in fights and stuff, but that was always good. We skateboarded a lot, so that's where kind of we became friends. We had a lot in common with video games and skateboarding and the same friend type.

The extended family stories demonstrated the ties that reach beyond the family home and continue even after stepsiblings no longer live together. "I still keep in contact with some of my stepsiblings and try and meet up with them if they are going to be in town for whatever reason. A lot of them are in other places now. But I still consider them family . . ." (Evan).

Who's my family? Obviously my immediate family, parents, grandparents, stepparents, you know just your aunts and uncles, things like that. The older I get the more I go off on my own, your friends are always, always with you, all the time, always supporting you and always willing to do whatever for you. They're kind of becoming my family as well. My boyfriend's parents are becoming family too because we spend so much time with them, so that's kind of crazy, getting all these parents. (Brenda)

How did the extended family members become family to the child? The family broadened to include these more distant individuals through the offer/accept pattern, sometimes with some prompting from a stepparent.

I remember we were on a houseboat and it was before my parents' wedding, before or after my parents' wedding. It was us five, my sisters and my stepdad and my mom and then my stepdad's parents and we were just on the houseboat for a little bit, but I remember because it was new and we didn't know what to call them. So we asked our mom, "What do we call them?" So we called him 'grandpa' and I remember him saying, "Don't call me that. You can call me anything you want except for a bad name and late for dinner." I remember being devastated because I was like "He doesn't want me to call him 'Grandpa'. What does that mean?" I took that so personally. That was bad. We call them 'Grandpa' and 'Grandma' now. I think they've come to accept it now. I know my stepdad was really



furious when he found out that my grandpa said that. He was really upset because he's always considered us to be his kids, always. He always says "You guys are my kids, I just have to share you sometimes." He was really upset and he was like, "You need to accept that they're my kids." (Lina)

Some extended families have accepted the stepfamily so completely that they celebrate various rituals together. Sally explains, "everyone, of course, was there for graduation. I have a picture with my dad, my stepdad, my grandpa on my dad's side and my grandpa on my stepmom's side, just every one. It's really nice because they were all there and they all get along too and they all talk so it wasn't weird to have them all around." She goes on to explain how the acceptance from her extended family gives her the "sense that they're going to be there."

#### You Are My Parent, But . . .

While the stereotypical declaration, "You're not my dad!" may have applied to some of the stepfamily stories told, a number of children in stepfamilies described the estrangement they felt from their biological parent. Nate explains that the stepfamily dynamic actually worked pretty well in his family. "It was just me and my dad that didn't get along." Sometimes the biological parent relationship seemed like a bigger problem than the relationship with a stepparent.

Actually, between 18 and 19 I did not stay with my father at all, which kind of hurt his feelings. I would go see him and watch football together. We didn't have that great a relationship or like as close a relationship as a lot of people's sons and fathers and so it was sort of like, okay go watch the Packer game with my buddy and his dad and they'd be like all into it. I'd go watch the Packer game with my dad and he'd be into it for a moment and then he'd want to go like get on his computer and do like this and this and just kind of like. So I didn't have the greatest relationship with my dad. (Daniel)

Anna also tells how her “sister, kind of, when she rebelled, she stopped going to my dad’s house much. When she turned 18, she was like, ‘I don’t have to.’ And he’s like ‘Yeah, you do.’”

From not being able to forgive a parent for leaving the family to parents who spent time in jail or on drugs, children told stories about biological parents who didn’t participate in their lives. “He can’t even send a birthday card or doesn’t even know my birthday. I don’t even think he knows when my birthday is. So I could care less if he is in my life. I don’t care about that” (Katie). Some children told stories about their attempts to have a relationship with a birth parent. “I tried living with my mom. She went off the deep end. She got into meth and went to prison, got out of prison, kind of got back on her feet with her husband. She’s had 6 husbands now, my dad and then 5 more after my dad” (Tim).

I guess over time I matured and realized that especially in my case, I’m sort of alone. I don’t know my real dad. I don’t talk to my stepdad. He was never anyone I could rely on anyways. My mom is kind of different from what I thought I knew. She’s got her own problems as far as financial issues and things that she’s got to take care of. She’s got to take care of my little brother and little sister. I’m kind of out on my own. (Randy)

Several children declared their love and loyalty toward a stepparent. Sometimes the stepchild didn’t consider the stepparent a “parent,” but instead, considered them to be more of a friend. Edward explained, “The relationship with my stepdad wasn’t fatherly; it was more like a friend . . . It’s always good. It’s fun. It’s a joking relationship.” In spite of considering his father’s girlfriend less than a family member, Edward described her positively, “We’re cool with each other. She’s really cool. We’re really nice, on friendly terms, but never really bonded . . .”

Sally also described her two stepparents in positive terms; however, in her case, she considered her stepmom more of a mother figure, but considered her stepdad as helpful, but not as a parent. “I call her ‘Mom’ now because I always hear her called ‘Mom’ by all of my stepbrothers and my little half-brothers . . . She really influences how my dad acts with me. . . They decide everything together.” In describing her relationship with her stepdad, Sally explained, “I’ve always called my stepdad ‘Jim’ because I hear him called ‘Jim’ by my mom. His kids call him ‘Dad,’ but I’m never around them. I don’t associate him with the term ‘Dad.’ He’s just ‘Jim’ to me . . . He’s there for me if I need money or anything. He’s a really good parent except he doesn’t have any say in how I was raised and what I got to do. He let my mom make all those decisions.”

In some cases, children in stepfamilies were legally adopted by a stepparent. Marie recalled that her dad [stepdad] adopted her “so now he’s my dad. I didn’t call him ‘Dad’ until I was about 12. There was a while there where it was just kind of like ‘Ted.’ It was awkward for a while. But sooner or later, he became ‘Dad’.” Marie also explained that she is “equally close with my mom’s family and my dad’s family.” In Lina’s family, her stepdad adopted her older sister, who was not the child of Lina’s father. She explains:

I view my dads as like I have two dads. . . . I think it’s that I’ve lived with my stepdad and he’s been like more of a dad than my stepdad. I guess just a different type of dad. I view them as “my dads.” Whereas, like my mom and then my stepmom . . . . I just have that special bond with my mom that’s like, I don’t know, it’s just different.

James’s stepdad did not legally adopt him, but married his mother (who was already divorced from his father) shortly after his birth dad died. He spoke of the transition from his dad to his stepdad. “From then on it was a process for me starting to call him ‘Dad.’ From what I can remember, it was pretty easy.”

Even children who were not adopted by their stepparents may claim their stepparent as a parent. Katie spoke at length about her positive relationship with her stepdad. “My stepdad stepped in as a dad a long time ago, before they were even married. I came out when I was five and asked him if he would be my dad. And ever since then, he’s been a wonderful man. I absolutely love him to death. He’s like my father.” In addition to calling him “Dad,” Katie considered changing her last name to his. “He’s definitely my dad and he’s going to walk me down the aisle one day. I’ve always wanted it. Just to have somebody like that.”

Katie is not the only stepchild who talked about the desire to change her last name to that of her stepdad. Though Barry had only been calling his stepdad “Dad” for about three years, “I always thought of him as my dad . . . My stepdad’s been there my whole life to do things with me and raise me. I think of him as my father.”

### **The Endings: And They All Lived Happily(?) Ever After**

Each participant found a way to wrap up the stepfamily story, providing some sort of closure or conclusion. The way he told it, Barry’s stepfamily experience sounded like a fairytale:

I think I was the one that actually ended up meeting my stepfather. Because it was my birthday, I remember that. They met somehow, my stepdad and my mom and then I think a year, maybe two years later they got married. They’ve been married ever since. We moved into the house that we are in when I was seven and we’ve been a happy family ever since.

Katie also told the love story of her mom and stepdad’s romance as a type of fairytale:

I’m grateful. Dad [stepdad] is so good . . . We lucked out. We really did. He takes good care of Mom and us girls, which is really nice. Mom always says she doesn’t need anyone to take care of her, but she needs him. I

think she definitely found her soul mate. They're perfect for each other. He's quiet. She's outspoken. They go well together . . . I'm glad they found each other . . . He literally swept her off her feet. She talks about it all the time. They worked at the same place. It was a scrap yard, so she was out underneath this roof because it was raining really hard and all the other guys had went in to the office and my dad went back out and got her, put a jacket over her, and made sure she didn't get wet while he was soaking wet. He's such a gentleman.

Conclusions were typically used to sum up the family. Participants wrapped up their stories with ending lines that were not always the last lines of their stories, but generally found near the end of the narrative. The few participants who told a predominantly negative story about the experience of living in a stepfamily concluded with the following:

I don't really care any more . . . I didn't choose for it to be this way. I don't feel guilty. This is just the way it is. (Randy)

I kind of feel like it's not my family any more. If I had to sum up the entire divorce and stepfamily stuff in one word it would be "compromise." It's all it's ever been. It's never been everything at one end. So a lot of compromises on everything. (Paul)

I don't really know anybody who's ever really been in love. That sounds terrible, but I have terrible thoughts about a relationship . . . I do not really have that much faith in relationships. (Anna)

On the other hand, the majority of participants concluded with a sort of "moral of the story," which made the stepfamily experience seem more palatable. Even in stories that included mostly negative assessments of the stepfamily experience, participants attempted to see the bright side:

I think if the divorce didn't happen I wouldn't know my dad half as well as I do now . . . I make this sound like it [the stepfamily] went really bad, really quick. It's not really that bad and it took a really long time to get this functionality to it. (Lucas)

Stepfamilies do come in all shapes and sizes. It's not like a totally bad experience. I got a dad out of the deal, which rules. I love that. I definitely

feel like I have a family. It's just one with problems, which many people have problems, so it will be interesting to see how it works out.  
(Kimberly)

It worked out cool. It was pretty cool. Because I came out with a friend.  
(Edward)

I think overall I really love all my stepfamily. It's just nice that they can all be there for each other. Even though I'm not close to everyone, it still gives me the sense that they're going to be there. They're divorced and they still, like know everyone in the family. It just proves that even if I don't feel connected, we really are, because we are family. (Sally)

Every family is different. Different things work for different people . . . I kind of just looked at them as my parents' spouses that I had to be respectful to and nice to. They cared a lot about me and I cared a lot about them. But they were never a replacement. They were never-- I never called them mom or dad. They were just too different. Which is good, because obviously, if they were the exact same as my parents, it wouldn't have worked anyway. (Brenda)

I've forgiven him [birth dad] for how he is. I can't change who he is and what he's done and the stuff he has put my family through all of our lives. I'm thankful for that because it could be a lot worse. It is how I see it. I couldn't imagine where my sister and I would be if we would have stayed over there. It sucked. I'm glad we went. I really am. (Katie)

My family is crazy. But it's good. (Delia)

We don't seem that we'd fit together, because we're all our own character, but we fit actually very nicely . . . It's weird how families are sometimes. There's a lot of love in my house. A lot of fighting too, but what family doesn't have fighting? (Jon)

Some people know how to take care. I just realize we're a family, a big one, a really big one. (Tim)

I got lucky. (Barry)

### **Metaphors**

One of my expectations at the outset of this study was that I would find metaphors within the stories that would help to explain the meanings behind the words. Indeed, the stories contained some metaphors, but relatively few. Family may be thought of as a

metaphor for coming together. In these stepfamily stories, coming together as a family was described as: a big juggling act, getting pushed around between parents, herding cats, something that the parents jumped into, a situation in which the child had to divide her time, and perhaps most movingly, “But for me I felt like a little nail. I just kept getting pounded down” (Anna).

Metaphors also described more positive aspects of the relationships within a stepfamily. James described the transition between his dad’s death and his mom’s marriage to his stepdad as “seamless”: “Once we hit the stride, it was like that forever.” Even more expressive about her stepfamily, Katie exudes, “I definitely love my family. It’s a big part of my life. It’s number one, on top of my list. I’d do literally anything for them. They’re my rock, my foundation.”

### **Timing Is Everything**

Each story provided insight into the way the participant was currently processing life experiences. After listening to 20 stories, one gets the distinct impression that the timing of the telling influences what story is told. Each participant told a story based on a current perspective, looking back, sometimes recognizing that the current viewpoint had changed dramatically over time. “Over time this dialogue become increasingly reflexive as the individual interacts with the world and appropriates new attachments, new stories, and new voices. Each narrative voice has its own constellation of attachments” (Raggatt, 2006, p. 22).

Taking into consideration the timing of the story becomes an essential step in interpreting the stepfamily experience. Evaluating a stepfamily as a “success” or a “failure” is impossible without waiting until the end of the story. These stories are “in

progress” as the participants construct their families. Several poignant examples shed light on this observation:

I think if you asked me these questions when I was 21 or 22, my responses or answers would have been, I don't want to say 180 degrees, but I would say significantly different based on everything I've done, everything I've seen, how I think. All of us have grown through time. I didn't make much of an effort, to tell you the truth. I think we are probably more of a family right now than we were back then. (Nate)

And I never really appreciated, I guess, what the burden of being a stepparent was, until years later and I'm not a stepparent or anything, but I just have the ability to recognize that he [my stepdad] didn't have to come in and take the reins, so to speak, of my mom and I. I was just kind of what came along with my mom and he accepted that. (James)

Even just in the past couple years I've kind of accepted him [my stepdad] more as my real father just because he's showed me everything and taught me everything I know. I remember in high school, I think I was probably a sophomore or something like that. I was writing a paper on my family. And I ended up writing on my stepdad. And when I was writing I realized that, "Yeah, he really is my dad." And then ever since then I've kind of thought of it differently and when somebody asks me about it, I do have a different response. (Barry)

The feelings kind of change daily . . . And I finally went to talk to someone and after a while we really discovered the reason behind all this anger and depression stuff was because of things I experienced when I was like 5, 6, 7, like my parents divorce and my dad cheating on my mom and certain situations my dad will put me in . . . Really, talking about it has really helped a lot. (Lina)

It's gotten easier as we've gotten older and we understand now that we've had our girlfriends and broken up with girlfriends. We understand a little bit of what it's like to be divorced . . . So, it takes a little bit of learning to appreciate what a stepmom or a stepdad has to go through to be part of your family. (Tim)

The “in progress” notion of family construction expressed in these stepfamily stories, while not unique to stepfamilies, may seem more noticeable because of the focus placed on active relationship negotiation in stepfamilies. “Narrative provides a means for self-exploration and self-understanding” for younger people and “a means for stability



and resolution” for older people (McLean, 2008, p. 254). Looking back at any family over time reveals an emerging story with twists and turns that may have been taken-for-granted at the time. The way one ends the story colors the story one tells.

## CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

Families faced with the challenge of constructing a stepfamily are much like any family. They engage in rituals as a means of symbolic communication. They negotiate relationships within the family. They develop a sense of family through interactions. Using storytelling as a method of understanding how stepfamilies communicate a sense of family resulted in three main points: (1) a sense of family is individually negotiated through ritualized offer/accept or reject patterns, (2) family identity is socially constructed and original parents' communication influences a child's ability to construct a sense of family with stepparents, and (3) individual stories impart insight into the scholarly study of stepfamilies, which cannot be discovered through observation alone, and the act of reflecting may contribute to a sense of family over time.

Although much focus has been placed on how a group of individuals socially constructs a family, the findings demonstrate the first point that individuals construct a personal sense of family with or without the cooperation of the rest of the family members within the system. Rather than focusing on the larger socially constructed rituals within the family, through stories it becomes clear that relationships within the socially constructed identity of the stepfamily were individually negotiated. These interpersonal interactions happened routinely within the context of the social construct of the family. More than a cooperative group effort, the stepparent role appears to be central to this new relationship (Schrodt, Soliz, & Braithwaite, 2008). Stepparents have an

opportunity to offer a relationship to the child(ren) in a stepfamily. Since the majority of offer/accept or reject negotiations in this study appear to originate with the stepparent, I speculate it is the more typical direction of the offer.

Developing unique rituals and symbolically communicating a relationship with an individual child often resulted in a sense of family for that child. Participants who claim a sense of family describe an ongoing ritual or set of rituals negotiated between the child and the stepparent. No matter what type of social environment a child experiences, rituals become the symbolic communication between stepparent and child that relay the willingness to offer and the willingness to accept or reject choice, negotiating the meaning of family for both.

Children then have an opportunity to accept or reject this offer of relationship and act “as active participants in the creation of their family’s unique culture” (Speer & Trees, 2007, p. 391). Children clearly play a pivotal role in establishing lines of communication within the family. Stepparents may offer a relationship, but children have the ability to accept or reject the offer. This may be one of the ways in which a child in a stepfamily can exert power and maintain a sense of control in a world where adults appear to be making all of the decisions.

The offer/accept or reject ritual happens daily through everyday interactions. It is demonstrated through shared inside jokes, pet names, shared or rival athletic teams, and a variety of everyday exchanges. The point is that the stepparent and child find a way to negotiate a relationship that has the essence of family to the two of them. Regardless of how the family system functions interdependently, a stepparent and child may be able to come to a place of feeling like family to each other. Even a rejection of parental offers

ritualized over time may contribute to a sense of family. More fragile than the offer/accept or reject ritual evidenced in an original family because of the assumptions made about original and stepfamilies, the continuing relational dance of stepfamily members is determined by the choice of either stepparent or child at any time.

Unlike original families, stepfamilies do not have taken-for-granted relationships that have been negotiated since a child's birth. Children in original families experience ongoing offers of relationship from their parents and face opportunities to accept or reject these parental offers as well, but because of socialization since infancy, they may not recognize or act upon their options except in extreme cases. Legally, they are bound to their original parents until adulthood whether or not they feel a sense of familial closeness or belonging. Children in stepfamilies accept or reject parental offers as an act of agency.

When a child actively rejects an offer from a stepparent, this behavior may be seen as part of a normal stepfamily relationship. Children are told stories of wicked stepmothers and evil stepfathers from childhood. They are socialized to expect the stepfamily relationship will be more fragile, more difficult, and may anticipate that the bonds will not be as impenetrable. Thus, children in stepfamilies take an extra step toward actively negotiating the stepparent-child relationship, which often does not present itself in original families.

Family can be recognized many ways including legally, contractually, transactionally, and functionally; but particularly in the case of stepfamily, a single definition does not come easily. This study does not seek to define family, but attempts to understand the ways in which stepfamily members communicate a sense of family and

make sense of their families as they tell their stories. Indeed, a child may reject a stepparent's offer of relationship and still participate as a family member. Children in this study expressed a variety of responses to offers of relationship from stepfamily members. Whether they accepted or rejected these offers did not determine their family membership. Ritualized accept or reject responses symbolize a sense of family rather than the existence of family.

Secondly, the findings emphasize and demonstrate that family identity is socially constructed and parental communication influences the child's ability to construct a sense of family. The stepfamily identity is not dependent solely on a parental agreement. Because one's parent marries someone new does not guarantee a "sense of family" for the child(ren) involved. This sense of family can be defined variously as feelings of closeness, inclusion, belonging, connection, and sharing a history together. Stepfamilies launch after negative circumstances such as the death, divorce, or estrangement of one's birth parents. Listening to the voices of these participants, it became clear that children in any particular family may demonstrate opposing responses to the same stepparent. Some reject the stepparent out of hand, some eventually come to a relationship of mutual respect (but not a feeling of parent-child) and still others regard their stepparent as a parent-figure, occasionally even as a replacement for the original parent.

In spite of less than ideal circumstances, these storytellers, rather than focusing on the faults that may be inherent within such constructions, overwhelmingly provide a sense of family moving from disorder to order. That these children of stepfamilies have found a way to consider their relations a family is a testament to the human ability to socially construct identity. Understanding how a sense of family is communicated

between stepparents and children requires acknowledging that it is a complicated process and may take years to develop.

Factors of ritualization were evident in each of the stories. Stories of repeated rituals, whether positive or negative, filled the transcripts. Children told how some rituals were neglected or forcefully stopped by stepparents, resulting in loss of relationship. Holiday rituals were often seen as a framework of meaning as stepfamilies negotiated how to keep the “old” while incorporating the “new.” Conversations between stepparent and child were remembered, even years later, as a method for establishing the standards of their relationships. Rituals, whether practiced by the collective family as celebrations and traditions, or routine everyday interactions practiced between individual family members allowed stepfamilies to maintain or lose a sense of continuity in the face of change.

Additionally, the findings show how parents can contribute to a child’s ability to construct a new sense of family. Listening to the stories in this study permitted me to witness the process of meaning-making through the narratives of 20 children in stepfamilies. Their stories provided great insight, and taken in combination led me to conclude that the way parents interact with each other, even after a divorce, influences how their child will negotiate a relationship with a stepparent. Storytelling provided a means for children of stepfamilies to explain the process of negotiating meaning within the family.

In cases where biological parents continued to be involved with the child, the parents’ willingness to accept new family members in the form of stepparents and extended stepfamilies was extolled by the participants as one way parents can

communicate a sense of support in the child's efforts to construct a new family structure that includes a stepparent. In situations where parents continued to work together to communicate, attend ritualized family functions (if not together, at least without rancor), and include extended family members in celebrations, children expressed appreciation for their parents' ability to set aside their differences for the sake of family. In cases where a biological parent abandoned a child, children told how they developed their own sense of family, sometimes with the aid of a stepparent who stepped up to fill the vacancy left by the parent. Alternatively, some children continued to yearn for and seek out a relationship with a distant or absent parent in spite of the offer of a relationship from a stepparent.

Lastly, the findings clearly demonstrate the value to scholarly research of individual stories and that these stories may change as individuals reflect over time. Stories allow researchers to see how participants create meaning out of the circumstances under study. While stepfamily narratives are not predictable fairytales starting with "Once upon a time" and ending with "happily ever after," they do contain universal elements of traditional stories: "a beginning, a middle, and an end through which they express a truth, a wisdom, certain values, or a lesson of life" (Atkinson, 1995, p. 22). The results of this study provide a glimpse into the storied lives of children in stepfamilies. Amazingly frank, these stories reveal an undercurrent of hurt and pain woven into tales of families under construction.

The importance of listening to the individual voices of children in stepfamilies cannot be overemphasized when studying stepfamily dynamics and communication. Whether a child is actively involved in a home where a stepfamily is currently negotiating its identity, or a child is a middle-aged adult whose stepfamily experience

exists mostly in the past, individuals who grow up in stepfamilies have a story to tell. Valuing these stories as windows into a process that has relevance for all families will ultimately add insight to the scholarly pursuit of communication, identity, and rituals.

Because of the complex and fragile nature of stepfamilies, no single method for studying them can be considered thorough. The findings of this study emphasize the need to understand the various ways that individual stepfamilies may develop (Braithwaite et al., 2001). This requires more than a systems method of study (Golish, 2003) or total reliance on individual studies; research must use multiple methods (Braithwaite et al., 1998) to study this complex arrangement of individuals. Listening to the stories of stepfamily members provides another valuable method to gain unique insight, not visible through other means.

The act of reflecting may contribute to a sense of family over time. While stepfamily identity is socially constructed and individually negotiated, it should be noted that it is always a work in progress. After time and reflection, many children of stepfamilies who initially rejected stepparent offers, eventually look back upon their stepfamily experience and come to define it as a family. These stories show how children of stepfamilies revise their views of the stepfamily relationship as they reflect back over time. The timing of the storytelling factors into the story told. The act of reflecting may develop a sense of family over time, even if the child does not feel a sense of family in the moment that it is being constructed. The value of telling one's own life story should not be underestimated. In the telling, one's own identity as well as the identity of the stepfamily may be enhanced. The individually negotiated relationships within larger socially constructed rituals provide a sense of family that may increase over time.



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APPENDIX A  
**Interview Questions**

## APPENDIX A

### Interview Questions

These interview questions are intended as a prompt to encourage volunteer participants to tell the story of their stepfamily. All questions will not necessarily be asked of every participant, but will be used if the participant needs help to tell their own personal story. The main question that will be asked of every participant is “Tell me the story of your stepfamily.” All further questions may be used as prompts to assist the participant in telling the story.

Breaks and pauses will be included among the questions in addition to allowing time to confirm with the participant that he or she is still comfortable with the interview. The participant will be encouraged to tell his or her own story at a pace that is comfortable for the participant. The participant will not be required to answer any particular question.

1. Tell me the story of your stepfamily.
  - a) How long have you been a member of a stepfamily?
  - b) How did your stepfamily begin?
  - c) Tell me about the parents and the children in your stepfamily.
  - d) Do you currently live with your stepfamily?
2. Families often communicate through rituals. Let’s think a bit about rituals that you may observe or participate in with your stepfamily.
  - a) Have your rituals changed over the course of time you have been a part of this stepfamily? If so, how?



- b) How are your stepfamily rituals different from your original family rituals?
  - c) Do you still practice your original family rituals?
  - d) As a child/stepchild in your stepfamily, how do you feel that you participated in the creation of any of your stepfamily's rituals?
3. How does your stepfamily handle conflict or difficulty?
- a) Is there a pattern that your stepfamily practices each time there is conflict?
  - b) In what way do your stepfamily conflicts differ from your original family conflicts?

### **Interview Summary**

This interview asked you to tell the story of your stepfamily. Do you have any questions about the interview process, the purpose of the study, or what the study hopes to uncover?

Thank you for participating in this study. Your personal information will be coded and kept confidential. The recording of this interview will be deleted at the completion of the transcription and interpretation process, no later than May 31, 2011.

APPENDIX B

**Stepfamily Interview Request**

## APPENDIX B

### **Stepfamily Interview Request**

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by a graduate student in the Department of Communication at Boise State University. The purpose of the study is to listen to and analyze personal stories of stepfamilies.

Participants will be undergraduate students or community members (18 or older) who lives/lived in a home with one biological parent, one stepparent, and at least one stepsibling for one or more years. If you fit into this category, the researcher will appreciate the opportunity to hear your stepfamily story.

The research tool used is an interview where you will be asked to tell the story of your stepfamily. Estimated time to complete the interview is 40 - 60 minutes. Interviews will be conducted and recorded in an office in the Communication Building.

Participation in the study is anonymous. There are no perceived risks from participating in the study. Information gathered will be transcribed and analyzed for publication.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may stop the interview at any time. If you have any questions about the study, please contact the researcher involved. Contact information is listed below.

Thank you for your time and assistance. Your story is valued and appreciated. Please keep this sheet for your information.

If you are willing to participate and are an undergraduate student or community member (18 or older) who lives/lived with one biological parent, one stepparent, and at least one stepsibling for 1 year or more, please contact:

Donna Jean Lang, BSU Graduate Student

[DonnaLang@u.Boisestate.edu](mailto:DonnaLang@u.Boisestate.edu)

APPENDIX C

**Consent to be a Research Participant**

## APPENDIX C

### **Consent to be a Research Participant** Boise State University

#### **A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND**

Donna Jean Lang in the Department of Communication at Boise State University is conducting a research study entitled “The Stepfamily Story: How a Sense of ‘Family’ is Communicated within Stepfamilies.” The purpose of this study is to help understand how stepfamilies communicate a sense of family. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a member of a stepfamily, over the age of 18.

#### **B. PROCEDURES**

If you agree to be in the study, the following will occur:

1. You will be interviewed by Donna Lang and be asked to tell the story of your stepfamily. Questions which may be asked may include: Tell me the story of your stepfamily. How long have you been a member of a stepfamily? How did your stepfamily begin? Tell me about the parents and the children in your stepfamily. Do you currently live with your stepfamily? Additional questions about rituals you may practice in your stepfamily may also be asked. Additional questions about how your stepfamily handles conflict or difficulty may be asked.
2. Your interview will be audio recorded and transcribed.
3. The interview process will take about 40 – 60 minutes, however you may take more time if you need it.

These procedures will be done at Donna Lang’s office (C-221) on the Boise State University Campus and will take a total time of about one hour.

#### **C. RISKS/DISCOMFORTS**

1. Minimal risk is associated with participating in this research project. The probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests.

2. It is possible that telling your stepfamily story may make you recall grief, making you feel uncomfortable or upset, but you are free to decline to answer any questions you do not wish to answer or to stop your participation at any time.
3. For this research project, no demographic information is necessary. Due to the make-up of Idaho's population, the combined details in your story may make an individual person identifiable. The researcher will make every effort to protect your confidentiality. However, if you are uncomfortable answering any questions or telling any part of your story, you may decline to answer or stop your participation at any time.
4. Participation in research may involve a loss of privacy; however, your records will be handled as confidentially as possible. Only Donna J. Lang and her supervising professor will have access to audio recording and transcription. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications that may result from this study.

#### **D. BENEFITS**

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information that you provide may help promote a better understanding of how stepfamilies communicate a sense of 'family'.

#### **E. COSTS**

There will be no costs to you as a result of taking part in this study, other than the time spent to participate.

#### **F. PAYMENT**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, with no monetary payment offered or expected.

#### **G. QUESTIONS**

If you have any questions or concerns about participation in this study, you should first talk with the investigator, Donna J. Lang (208-426-1910). If for some reason you do not wish to do this, you may contact the Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. You may reach the board office between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday, by calling (208) 426-5401 or by writing: Institutional Review Board, Office of Research Compliance, Boise State University, 1910 University Dr., Boise, ID 83725-1138.

Should you feel discomfort due to participation in this research and you are a BSU student, you may contact the Boise State University Health and Wellness Center for counseling services at (208) 426-1601. If you are not a BSU student and you feel discomfort, you should contact your own health care provider or call the 211 Idaho CareLine.

#### **H. CONSENT**

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

**PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY.** You are free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point. Your decision as to whether or not to participate in this study will have no influence on you present or future status as a BSU student.