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Leslie A. Baxter

*University of Iowa*, [leslie-baxter@uiowa.edu](mailto:leslie-baxter@uiowa.edu)

Dawn O. Braithwaite

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, [dbraithwaite1@unl.edu](mailto:dbraithwaite1@unl.edu)

Leah A. Bryant

*DePaul University*, [lbryant2@depaul.edu](mailto:lbryant2@depaul.edu)

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# Types of Communication Triads Perceived by Young-Adult Stepchildren in Established Stepfamilies

Leslie A. Baxter , Dawn O. Braithwaite, and Leah E. Bryant

*Corresponding author* – Leslie A. Baxter, 105 BCSB, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242, phone 319-353-2259, email [leslie-baxter@uiowa.edu](mailto:leslie-baxter@uiowa.edu)

## Abstract

This study was an analysis of the kinds of residential parent-stepparent-stepchild triadic communication structures expressed in interviews with 50 college-aged children from established stepfamilies. In an interpretive analysis of the interview transcripts, four communication structures were identified. In the *linked triad* the stepchild relied on indirect communication with the stepparent through his or her residential parent. The *outsider triad* was characterized by the stepchild communicating primarily with the residential parent with limited awareness of interdependence with the stepparent. In the *adult-coalition triad* the stepchild perceived that the residential parent and stepparent had formed a coalition, leading to cautious and distrustful communication with both adults. The *complete triad* featured the stepchild experiencing a “real family” with open communication with both the residential parent and the stepparent. Contributions of studying stepfamilies from the perspective of triadic communication structures versus stepfamily dyads are discussed.

**Keywords:** family systems theory, stepchildren, stepfamily structures, triangulation

Stepfamilies are a growing family form in the United States; an estimated one-third of children will live in a stepfamily household before they reach majority age (Fine & McBride, 2003). Yet stepfamilies often pose unique challenges to their members, including, among others, issues of family loyalty, lack of familiarity and trust among some stepfamily members, and the noninstitutionalized status of the stepfamily system (Ganong & Coleman,

2004). Understanding the challenges and strengths of stepfamily communication is important in order to assist stepfamily members and professionals working with them (Braithwaite, Schrodtt, & Baxter, 2006; Ganong & Coleman, 1994, 2004; Golish, 2003). To better understand stepfamily communication, we identified two trends in the research literature that formed the impetus for the present study. First, researchers studying stepfamilies have focused their work on dyadic subsystems, rather than at the level of the family system (Braithwaite, Schrodtt, & Baxter, 2006). Second, scholars have focused attention on the adult perspective in the stepfamily, to the relative neglect of the stepchild's view (Amato, 1994; Dunn, Davies, O'Connor, & Sturgess, 2001; Gamache, 1997; Schrodtt, in press). In the present study we adopted a systems approach with an emphasis on the triad comprised of parent, stepparent, and child. More particularly, our purpose was to examine the perceptions of young-adult stepchildren concerning the triadic communication structures that typify their stepfamilies.

### **Focus on Stepfamily Subsystems**

Researchers have most often studied the stepparent-stepchild dyad, followed by the marital dyad, and, last, the residential parent-child dyad. These subsystem-level findings are helpful in providing partial views of communication in the stepfamily. Regarding the stepparent-stepchild dyad, Fine, Coleman, and Ganong (1998) reported that the stepparent role is often ambiguous or unclear, lacking clear social norms and stepparent-stepchild agreement on expectations for the role. Due to the lack of clarity of the stepparent role, a variety of stepparent-stepchild relations are possible and evident in stepfamilies (Fine & McBride, 2003). For example, a stepparent may opt not to be involved at all in the stepchild's life. At the other end of the continuum, the stepparent may attempt to act like a parent in assuming parental authority. Alternatively, the stepparent may simply support the actions of the residential parent without independently seeking parental authority. The stepparent may also attempt to function as a supportive friend to the stepchild. Some researchers have found that stepfamilies in their formative years are better adjusted when the stepparent refrains from taking an active role in parental discipline, whereas more established stepfamilies might benefit from increasingly active parenting from the stepparent (e.g., Bray, 1999; Hetherington, 1999). Other researchers suggested that the issue is less about which role the stepparent adopts and more about the issue of clarity and consensus about stepparent role expectations (e.g., Golish, 2003; Kurdek & Fine, 1991). Stepparents often report feeling "caught" between their spouse and their stepchild with respect to role expectations (e.g., Afifi, 2003; Golish, 2003). In general, stepparents and parents hold stronger parenting expectations for the stepparent than do stepchildren (Fine & McBride, 2003).

The second stepfamily dyad to receive research attention is the marital dyad. Researchers have argued that the remarried couple must establish a strong couple bond for the success of the stepfamily (e.g., Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). However, this task can be challenging, especially if a close bond had been established between the residential parent and the child during their postdivorce period of living in a single household (e.g., Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998; Golish, 2003). Part of establishing a strong couple bond is constructing a boundary around the marital dyad (Browning,

1994), and, in fact, most of the conflicts experienced by remarried couples appear to revolve around boundary issues (Coleman, Ganong, & Weaver, 2001).

Last, the residential parent-child dyad is the least studied dyad in stepfamilies. Since mother-stepfather households are the most frequent type of stepfamily household (Fields, 2001), we know more about the residential mother-child relationship than we do about the residential father-child relationship. Ganong and Coleman (2004) argued that remarried mothers in stepfamilies enact roles as gatekeeper, defender, mediator, and interpreter as they navigate between simultaneous roles as mother and spouse. Gatekeeping mothers control stepfathers' access to their children both before and after the marriage; gatekeeping thus regulates the amount of stepfather involvement in parenting. Some mothers enter remarriage with the expectation of limited stepparent involvement and sustain this role (e.g., Bray & Kelly, 1998). When remarried mothers enact a defender role, they feel the need to take the child's side against the stepparent, thereby creating a strain on the marriage (Browning, 1994). Remarried mothers also function as interpreters, educating the stepparent and the children to each other. Finally, remarried mothers can function as mediators who intervene in stepparent-stepchild conflicts and often experience role conflicts between the mother and spouse role (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Other researchers have similarly reported that parents feel "caught" between their children and their spouse (e.g., Afifi, 2003; Golish, 2003).

### **Focus on Stepfamily Systems**

Research findings on these three dyadic relationships are informative, yet limited when trying to understand communication in the stepfamily system. Systems-oriented research that weaves these three dyadic subsystems into a more complex triadic framework is absent in the stepfamily literature. Some dyadic combinations are logically compatible, yet researchers have not examined them empirically. For example, a parent who adopts a strong gatekeeping role is compatible with stepparent roles characterized by limited parenting; reciprocally, parenting roles of interpretation, defense, and mediation imply that the stepparent has adopted a more active parenting role. A parental role of defender seems to work against a couple's ability to develop a successful boundary around their marriage; a parent who puts his or her marriage first might withdraw from any role enactment that exacerbates parent-spouse role conflict.

In the present study we adopted a family-systems perspective in shifting from the dyad to the triad as the focus. As Galvin, Dickson, and Ferguson (2006) explained, "a system is a set of components that interrelate with one another to form a whole" that forefronts "an intense focus on the emergent nature of relational patterns" (p. 311-312). Galvin et al. stressed that communication is central to understanding family patterns. By focusing on the stepparent-stepchild-parent triad from the perspective of the young-adult stepchild we attempted to recognize the important systems concepts of complex relationships, interdependence, wholeness, and patterns/regularities (Brooks-Gunn, 1994; Galvin et al., 2006; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Klein & White, 2002).

The three constituent dyads of parent-child, stepparent-stepchild, and spousal couple reflect the major complex relationships in a stepfamily system. Rather than examining each

dyad to the exclusion of others, adopting a systems lens allowed us to concentrate on how the stepparent-stepchild, parent-stepparent, and parent-child dyads are interdependent with one another. Viewed from the perspective of the young-adult stepchild, this focus on the triad allowed us to understand how each triadic whole develops communication patterns and regularities that reflect the normative expectations and habituated practices of stepfamily members.

System patterns can be approached in any of several ways. In the present study, we emphasized young-adult stepchildren's perceptions of family structure. Minuchin's (1974) family systems theory places the concept of family structure at its core; a family structure is an organized pattern of interaction among family members. When certain interaction patterns are repeated, enduring patterns, expectations, and rules emerge that determine who can communicate with whom, and how (Bochner & Eisenberg, 1987). Subsystems have invisible interpersonal boundaries that regulate the amount and kind of contact with other family members. Boundaries can be rigid or diffuse (Klein & White, 2002). A subsystem with a rigid boundary functions to exclude other family members; by contrast, a diffuse subsystem has boundaries that are permeable with open interactions among family members.

A systems focus on boundary rigidity and diffuseness focuses on the extent to which family members can openly permeate subsystem boundaries and function as one cohesive entity. When subsystems are characterized by rigidity, a coalition can result in which other family members are excluded or positioned as outsiders. One of the most robust concepts in understanding family coalitions is triangulation. Triangulation can be enacted in a variety of ways but "always involves a pair of family members incorporating or rejecting a third family member" (Lindahl, 2003, p. 1660).

Family systems therapists, most notably Bowen (e.g., 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) and Minuchin (1974), have been important in establishing the triangulation pattern as important to family functioning. In family systems theory Bowen (1978) has emphasized, among other things, the concept of the emotional triangle. In an emotional triangle, a person who is experiencing stress in a dyadic relationship positions a third family member in some fashion. For example, a husband who is upset with his wife might spend more time with his son, thereby establishing a coalition of sorts with the son. From a Bowenian perspective, fluid triangulation is a normal and natural occurrence, as dyadic relationships naturally experience the ebb-and-flow of closeness and distance. However, triangulation can become rigidified in families that are experiencing ongoing stress.

Minuchin (1974) identified two kinds of triangulation: detouring and cross-generational coalitions. Detouring occurs when parents who are experiencing marital conflict focus their negativity on the child. Cross-generational coalitions occur when one parent becomes enmeshed in the child's needs, responding with excessive devotion, in an attempt to win over the child as an ally against the other parent. Parental bonding with a child in response to marital stress, whether through emotional triangles, detouring, or cross-generational coalitions, has been linked empirically in first-marriage families to marital dysfunction (e.g., Kerig, 1995; Lindahl, Clements, & Markham, 1997) as well as to child dysfunction (e.g., Jenkins, Smith, & Graham, 1989; O'Brien, Margolin, & John, 1995).

Unfortunately, the work on family triads, including triangulation, has been conducted largely on first-marriage families and most often from the perspective of the adults. For example, how children form structures with a parent has been understudied. In addition, we have little insight into how family triadic structures, including triangulated structures, function in stepfamilies, especially from the child's perspective. Thus, the research question that guided our work in the present study was:

RQ1: What are young-adult stepchildren's perceptions of triadic communication structures in their established stepfamilies?

## **Method**

As we were focusing on young-adult stepchildren's sense-making of parent-stepparent-stepchild triadic communication, we centered our study in the interpretive paradigm. Qualitative/interpretive researchers focus on questions of meaning from the "native's point of view" (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Bochner, 1985) and they seek intelligibility and understanding by identifying the similarities in meanings that phenomena or processes hold for the informants (Bochner, 1985; Creswell, 1998; Leininger, 1994). As Bochner (1985) described, "By analyzing symbolic actions in terms of their meanings, the investigator hopes to gain access to the informal logic of social life" (p. 44).

### ***Participants***

Fifty volunteer stepchildren at two large Midwestern universities, 33 females and 17 males, agreed to be interviewed about communication in their stepfamilies in exchange for extra credit in undergraduate communication courses. The mean age of participants was 21.0 years ( $SD = 1.70$ ), and they ranged in age from 19 to 26 years. Forty-seven of the participants were Caucasian, two were African American, and one was Latino. In the event that a participant was a member of more than one stepfamily structure, we asked him or her to discuss the stepfamily in which the majority of time was spent. The mean length of participants' stepfamilies was 11.9 years ( $SD = 4.3$ ). A total of 31 of the participants described stepfamilies that contained a stepfather, while 19 contained a stepmother. Our sample contained both simple stepfamily structures (in which only one parent brought children into the stepfamily) and complex structures (in which both parents brought children with them into the remarriage).

### ***Data Collection Procedures***

The sample of young-adult stepchildren participated in semi-structured, focused interviews (Kvale, 1996; McCracken, 1988). Interviewers asked and received permission to tape record the interviews. Participants were assured confidentiality, consistent with institutional policies to protect human subjects. Consistent with the practice of qualitative, in-depth interviewing (e.g., Kvale, 1996; McCracken, 1988), the interviewers asked participants all of the interview protocol questions, but they were encouraged to pursue other related issues and topics as they deemed appropriate and necessary. The interview protocol focused on stepchildren's perceptions of communication and relationships in their

stepfamilies at the time of the interview. Participants first provided the interviewer with demographic information about their stepfamily, including its composition and how and when the family was formed. Interviewers then focused on participants' perceptions of typical communication in their stepfamilies; that is, perceptions of the way communication usually was enacted. Similar to the approach of Vangelisti, Crumley, and Baker (1999), participants were asked to tell a story about a typical communication event in the stepfamily and to discuss that narrative with the interviewer. Then participants were asked to reflect on how the story might change if communication were ideal in their stepfamily. We asked participants to reflect on the positive aspects and on the challenging aspects of communication in the stepfamily as a whole, and separately with each member of the stepfamily—the residential parent, the nonresidential parent, the stepparent, siblings and stepsiblings, and extended family members. In the present study we focused on perceptions of communication within the parent-stepparent-stepchild triad.

The first and second authors trained the four graduate student interviewers for the study (and one of these interviewers became the third author on this manuscript). Interviews lasted approximately one hour in length. Audiotapes of the interviews were transcribed for the purposes of analysis.

### *Data Analysis*

The interviews generated 802 double-spaced pages of transcribed text for purposes of analysis by the three authors. For the present study, we took into analytic account all text that was relevant to the parent-stepparent-stepchild triad, including reflections about the stepfamily as a whole and participants' reflections concerning the parent and the stepparent. Interpretive analytic coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) was employed to analyze these data in two stages. In the first stage of the analysis, the first two authors began by independently reading through all the transcripts multiple times in order to gain familiarity with the data set as a whole. They then independently created categories to capture major themes relevant to the aims of the present study.

The analysis was organized around Spradley's (1979) analytic concept of the semantic relationship. A semantic relationship is a kernel of meaning from the participant's point of view, and there are several types of semantic relationships that can be important in constituting the meaning of something. Spradley (p. 93) has identified nine different generic kinds of semantic relationships: Strict Inclusion ("X is a kind of Y"); Spatial ("X is a place in Y; X is a part of Y"); Cause-Effect ("X is a result of Y; X is a cause of Y"); Rationale ("X is a reason for doing Y"); Location for Action ("X is a place for doing Y"); Function ("X is used for Y"); Means-End ("X is a way to do Y"); Sequence ("X is a step (stage) in Y"); and Attribution ("X is an attribute [characteristic] of Y"). In this study, analysis was centered on the Strict-Inclusion semantic relationship: "X is a kind of Y." "Y" in our analytic coding represented the "parent-stepparent-stepchild communication structure" and "X" represented the coded categories that emerged from our participants' talk about their respective stepfamilies—that is, the various kinds of triadic structures reported by our participants. Whenever we encountered a transcript segment that provided insight into a kind of triadic structure, it was assigned an analytic coding category (an X). The analysis involved an inductive process in which new data were compared to prior data for their similarity or

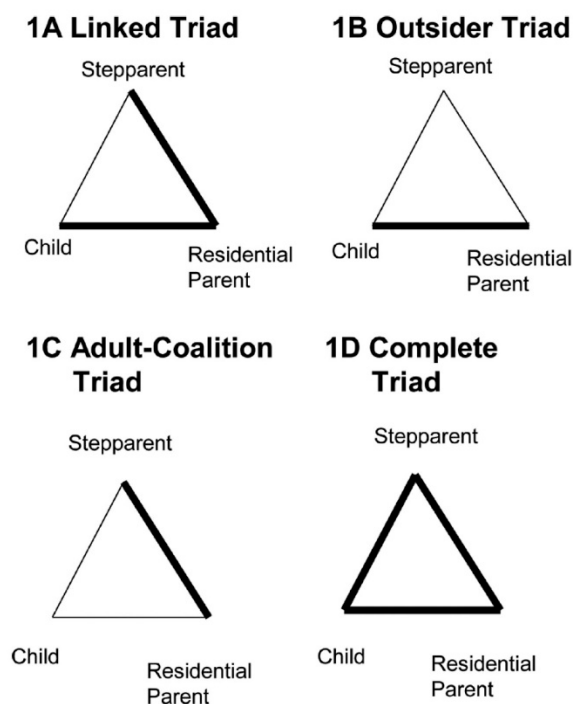
difference. When data were perceived to be different from prior data, a new category was then created. The process was iterative, as we added, revised, and combined categories until the categories as a set accounted for the data and did not require further modification.

Several scholars have addressed strategies interpretive researchers may use to demonstrate validity and reliability of their analysis (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The second stage of our analysis was centered around a process of investigator triangulation (Creswell, 1998; Keyton, 2001; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As Keyton (2001) explained: "Two researchers observing the same interaction are likely to capture a more complete view of what happened in the interaction than would one observer, due to different vantage points or differing perspectives. Their interpretations may blend into one as they talk about what happened" (p. 288). Unlike observer reliability, as commonly practiced among quantitative researchers, in which the goal is to determine the extent to which independent coders agree in their perceptions of some phenomenon, the goal of investigator triangulation is to provide an enriched understanding of the data that builds from the overlapping yet distinct subjective interpretations of the investigators. The first and second authors triangulated their analyses through an iterative process of discussion, revisiting the data, and further discussion until both were convinced that the analytic categories adequately captured variation in the data. The third author checked their analysis against her own interpretative analysis of all of the transcript data. The three researchers then identified representative exemplars for the research report. Last, the researchers rechecked their analysis by rereading the transcripts "against the grain" to search for rival interpretations of the data and to ensure the integrity of the categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## Results

Four types of triadic communication structures were evident in young adults' talk about their stepfamily experiences: the *linked triad*, the *outsider triad*, the *adult-coalition triad*, and the *complete triad*. Each will be discussed in turn. We illustrate each of these kinds of triadic communication structures visually in Figure 1.





**Figure 1.** Perceived types of triadic communication structures in the stepfamily. A darker line represents the presence of a direct, positively valenced line of communication in a given stepfamily dyad, and a lighter line represents the absence of a direct, positively valenced line of communication.

### *The Linked Triad*

The *linked triad* type dominated these data, emerging in slightly over half of the transcripts. Young-adult stepchildren who experienced this type of communication structure indicated that they wanted the residential parent to function as an intermediary between themselves and the stepparent, fulfilling either transmission/interpretation or advocacy/protection functions. Participants felt closer to the residential parent than to the stepparent, even though these stepfamilies were well established at the time of the interview. The young-adult stepchild recognized an interdependent relationship with the stepparent; that is, the stepchild recognized that his or her life was affected somehow by the stepparent. At the same time, however, communication with the stepparent was often indirect, rather than direct; the residential parent was invoked as an intermediary, connecting the stepchild to the stepparent. The stepchild relied on the medium of the residential parent, as it was recognized that the parent occupied the middle spot, linked both to the child and to his or her spouse. Figure 1A illustrates this triadic structure visually. One male participant, from a complex stepfather family structure, in which both adults brought children from prior relationships, illustrated the transmission role of the residential parent in describing his stepfamily of ten years length:

A lot of stuff I communicate with my stepdad goes through my mom just 'cuz I, I mean . . . I'm used to calling my mom first. I am closer to my mom, so I usually call her first. My mom raised me by herself for a while, and I just, I got real close to her. . . . My stepdad has always been real supportive of everything that I've wanted to do and he does everything he can to help me do it. [But] I am just kind of close to my mom, I trust her, and she's always been right in my life. (#48, ll. 38–66; this notation reflects interview and line number from interview transcripts)

This son sought the intermediary role from his mother due to their close relationship that has “always” been part of his life. In this case, the stepfather was not perceived as unsupportive or hostile; the participant communicated indirectly with him since he simply did not feel as close with his stepfather as he did with his residential parent.

A female participant, from a simple stepfather family structure of seven years duration, echoed this same conduit theme. In addition, like several participants, she emphasized the need for the parent to function as an interpreter or translator so that the stepparent could better understand her. She and her siblings relied on their residential mother to help their stepfather understand them:

Bill [her stepfather] has no kids, so he's not used to how we work, how we are, what kids are like. He doesn't know. So, a lot of times, he'll come up with his opinion on a particular matter . . . and so my mom, we get her to explain to him that it doesn't really work that way. He's like okay, and he's really open to learning, but he just thinks in an adult manner. . . . So, a lot of it's like my mom trying to help him understand how to react with us. (#11, ll. 95–115)

This participant (and, from her report, apparently her siblings as well) positioned their mother as a conduit who needed to translate on behalf of the children, so that the stepfather would understand them. The relationship with the stepfather was not hostile; instead, she framed him as someone who did not understand how to deal with kids, despite the fact that the stepfamily had been formed for seven years.

A second reason participants sought the intermediary role from their residential parent was that they perceived the need for an advocate or protector. Unlike the conduit/translator function, this function was based on a more negative relationship with the stepparent. Sometimes, in complex stepfamily structures, in which both parents brought children to the new family structure, the need for an advocate was based on a perception of favoritism. In response to a general question asking for a typical story about how communication was enacted in her stepfamily, one female participant, who was part of a complex stepmother family structure of eleven years duration, explained the need for a parental advocate:

The way my brothers and I saw it was that my dad treated us the same and he tried to treat her children the same, but we saw a difference in the way she treated her children and the way she treated us. . . . My brothers and I were being

treated differently than her children were. If we, my brothers and I, had an issue, we would talk to our dad. (#5, ll. 94–138)

The children in this stepfamily would go to their residential father to seek protection against what they perceived as unfair favoritism displayed by the stepmother.

Other participants sought parental intervention and advocacy since they thought that the stepparent was acting inappropriately by assuming parental authority. One female participant, in a stepfather structure for eighteen years, recognized her mother was trapped in the middle between herself and her stepfather when she would bring a complaint to her mother but nonetheless sought intervention:

She [the participant's mother] was always in the middle, so I know that was hard for her because I would always have an argument: "You are letting this man just tell your child what to do. He has no parts of me." (#13, ll. 241–243)

Since the stepfather had no biological links to the participant ("no parts of me"), he was perceived to have no authority to function as a parent. The stepchild brought the complaint to her mother with the hope that she would intervene in the matter, despite awareness by the participant that this would position her mother "in the middle."

For other participants, the residential parent was sought as an advocate to cope with any action by the stepparent deemed inappropriate or worthy of complaint. For example, one female participant, reporting on her fifteen-year stepmother structure, shared with the interviewer a story she perceived to typify communication in her stepfamily:

My stepmom would make us breakfast, you know just cereal. You know she would make the cereal and then she would give us a glass of orange juice. And my brother and I, we were happy that she was making breakfast and stuff, you know, but I didn't like drinking orange juice. It seems so silly now, but I didn't like drinking orange juice with my cereal, 'cause I didn't like the sweet and the sour. I didn't really know how to tell her, so I went and told my dad one morning after she had done it for a while, and like I didn't say anything and finally I said something to my dad. He told my stepmom and my stepmom got angry. She kind of stomped around the house the rest of the morning. My dad said something to her, and they both just didn't make me drink it anymore. (#22, ll. 54–63)

For this participant, like several others, the parent was sought as an advocate to intervene with the stepparent and seek change responsive to the complaint against the stepparent.

### *The Outsider Triad*

Like the *linked triad* communication structure, the young-adult stepchildren who experienced the *outsider triad* structure reported feeling very close to their residential parent. However, in contrast to the *linked triad* structure, the young-adult stepchild recognized only limited interdependence with the stepparent, and thus little need to communicate with him or her. The stepparent was an absent presence—there but functionally irrelevant

to the child's everyday life. The stepparent was viewed as an outsider who lived an existence outside the only relationship that was important to the young-adult child—the dyadic relationship with the residential parent. The young-adult children reported that meaningful communication was limited to the residential parent, except for a veneer of distanced superficiality with the stepparent. This triadic communication structure is represented visually in Figure 1B.

The following description, provided by a female participant from a 13-year complex stepfamily structure, is typical of the *outsider triadic* structures. The interviewer had asked the participant to tell a story about the stepfamily that typified how communication was enacted:

P: When I need something, I go directly to my mom. And I focus my talking towards my mom. And um like when we're watching the TV, I mostly, I just really, I just always turn to my mom and usually talk to her. . . . On day-to-day things I just turn to my mom. . . . Well, if we're eating dinner we're usually watching TV, so he [stepfather] just might be—we'll all talk, like he might just be watching TV or whatever. My mom and I obviously have more in common 'cause I don't have a lot in common with him necessarily because he has different interests than I do and stuff. . . . If I walk into a room, I'll probably be coming to address my mom about something, like "I'm going here, what should I do about this?" and you know "My brother is giving me trouble" or something like that. I usually direct things to her.

I: OK, why do you think the communication happens like this? What makes it typical?

P: Um, I think because . . . we didn't ever get a bond you know between us so we don't talk about a lot of things in my life or specifically in-depth conversation. It's just the way our relationship has been; it's just because I've always had my mom there. We just never got more of an intimate bond, you know. (#3, ll. 74–110)

This participant reported that while she communicated with her stepparent about superficial things, such as what was on TV, her day-to-day life basically revolved around communication with her residential parent. Typical of many participants, this participant's relationship with the stepparent, while not hostile, was not particularly close either.

Another participant, a male in a 16-year complex stepfamily household, echoed this same theme of reliance on the dyadic relationship with the residential parent:

He [the stepfather] isn't that talkative of a man to begin with so we never talk to him that much and my parents are doctors too, so they are always coming and going. We mainly just talk to my mom, I guess, about most anything or if a problem ever arises, if we need something we talk to my mom. Sometimes I even wonder if my mom would feel kind of, not misled—I'm looking for the word—I

don't know, but like she would probably get a little weirded out if we just went and asked my stepdad and then did something. (#6, ll. 84–91)

This participant perceived that his mother would probably react negatively should he go to the stepparent for anything, suggesting that his mother played an active role in gate-keeping access to the stepfather.

### *The Adult-Coalition Triad*

The *adult-coalition* communication structure was one in which the young-adult stepchild perceived that the formerly close relationship with the residential parent had been compromised due to the parent's loyalty to his/her spouse. The young-adult child felt a sense of betrayal from their residential parent from this perceived loyalty shift. Communication with the residential parent was characterized by suspicion and mistrust that the parent would "side with" the stepparent. The stepchild felt uncomfortable talking with the stepparent due to the same underlying suspicion of an adult coalition. Figure 1C visually represents this triadic communication structure.

One female participant, from a complex stepmother family structure of twelve years duration, told us that this betrayal took the form of her father making excuses for the stepmother:

My sister and I have some difficulties with my stepmom. . . . I have to talk to my dad about my stepmom because I can't communicate with my stepmom. I can . . . just be like "Meg [the stepmother] this, Meg that, this is going on," and stuff. And he'll say, "Well, honey, you have to understand this and this and this," and like makes excuses for her, and I kind of want to say to him, "Well, we're your daughters," you know. (#18, ll. 286–299)

This participant, like many, was frustrated in her efforts to communicate with her residential parent, as she perceived his loyalties had shifted such that he sided with his wife.

For other participants, the *adult-coalition triad* was experienced as ongoing competition with the stepparent for the loyalty of the residential parent. As one participant, from a simple stepfamily household for seven years, expressed, "Because I'm older and I'm a girl maybe like I'm of . . . like . . . in indirect competition with her" (#12, l. 226). However, the stepchildren reported that they usually "lost" the competition; this participant perceived that she was denied power in the family due to a coalition between her father and her stepmother: "If those two are together, then I feel like it's not worth talking to either of them, because I just feel there is a power imbalance so I just don't talk to them" (ll. 146–147).

### *The Complete Triad*

Appearing least in the talk of these young-adult stepchildren was the communicative structure in which the young-adult child reported functional, positive communicative relationships throughout the triad—between the child and the residential parent, between

the two spouses, and between the stepchild and the stepparent. This structure is represented visually in Figure 1D. The following excerpt is representative of this triad and was taken from an interview with a male participant, who was reporting on his complex stepfather household of twelve years duration. The interviewer asked this participant to tell a story that typified what communication was like in his stepfamily:

It was three years ago, and it was my stepbrother had invited us all over to his place and he announced to us that he was getting married. We had about a two-hour wonderful discussion about everything, how life was gonna be for him and how everybody else was doing. . . . We got into a big discussion just about life in general—how it was going to be, what we were going to do. . . . We're all really close. We've been close pretty much since day one. So it's always been, it's never felt like anything else. . . . My family is like a family. It's not, I don't feel like I'm in a blended family. (#26, ll. 35–67)

This participant, who reported that he also maintained a positive relationship with his nonresidential father, explained that he (and his siblings and stepsiblings) felt comfortable talking with both the residential parent and the stepparent. When asked to reflect on why his stepfamily is this way, this participant elaborated:

[My stepdad] is very listening. He's very open to communication. He's willing to talk to you about anything. He's always been there. He's really wanting to be my dad. That's the way it's always been. . . . [My mom] has been there. I'm really close to her. . . . She wants us to talk as much as we can [to the stepparent] and it's been a big help. (#26, ll. 77–103)

Another participant, in a simple stepfather structure for eight years, reported that his stepfamily was “shaky” in the beginning: “At first I was really cautious. . . . I had had a very bad relationship with my stepfather before then. This was my third dad” (#50, ll. 7–9). However, in this participant's family the mother-stepfather-child triad had grown to become strong:

I'll call home and I'll talk to my stepfather and I'll talk to my mom. As far as communication works, I guess just like any other family. I don't see anything being any different. He's like a father to me, I mean, I still do talk to my real dad but it's not as relevant. (#50, ll. 65–68)

In contrast to the prior participant's experience, where the sense of being a *complete triad* was almost immediate, this participant's experience was slower to develop but had reached the same point—a *complete triad* in which the participant experienced a family, “just like any other family.”

The sense of being a “real family” that was realized in the experience of our participants in the *complete triad* structure was only idealized by many participants who experienced the other three triadic communication structures. Again and again, our participants told

us that their family ideal was the *complete triad* structure. One of our participants, who described her experience with a *linked triad* structure, talked with us about her ideal stepfamily:

If it was ideal communication, I think we would, you know, if we had issues within our family we would all sit down. Like, I would, all of the stepchildren, would feel comfortable talking to either parent. I think that would be the ideal situation. Or, you know, if we could sit down in like a family meeting type setting and talk about stuff. (#5, ll. 161–165)

One of our female participants who experienced an *outsider triad* structure echoed this same idealization: “The ideal would be open channels of communication between everyone” (#3, ll. 135–136). One of our participants who experienced the *adult-coalition triad* described the ideal this way: “I think that [my stepmother] would be participating in the communication, not manipulating [my dad]. . . . It would be like conversation that like regular people have about a situation. . . . You’d want to share. . . . It wouldn’t seem so difficult to do. . . . There is respect” (#12, ll. 93–121). Clearly, for the young-adult stepchildren we encountered in the present study, the *complete triad* was the ideal stepfamily to which they aspired.

## Discussion

Our young-adult stepchild participants articulated four kinds of triadic communication structures between themselves and their respective residential parents and stepparents: the *linked triad*, most common in our data; the *outsider triad*; the *adult-coalition triad*; and the *complete triad*, least frequent in our data. Adopting a family systems perspective (Galvin et al., 2006), these four triadic structures move beyond looking at stepfamilies dyadically and help paint increasingly complex snapshots of the different triadic communication structures present between parents, stepparents, and children in stepfamilies.

The findings in the present study complement existing research that is heavily biased in favor of stepfamilies in their early formative years; for example, Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999) studied stepfamily development over the first four years of stepfamily life. While it is important to study these early years, scholars know much less about interaction in established stepfamilies—those stepfamilies that have progressed beyond the first three to five years it takes to establish stable expectations, norms, and patterns (Hetherington, 1999). The clinically oriented work (e.g., Papernow, 1993) tends to suggest that established stepfamilies should have worked through the challenges of their early formative years, achieving positive relations. However, our present study of established stepfamilies suggests that complete triads were relatively infrequent in our established stepfamilies, at least from the perspective of our young-adult stepchildren. Relatedly, the other three structures, especially the *linked triad* structure, were much more common. Further, our few participants who identified a *complete triad* structure were split between those who experienced this structure early on and those for whom this structure emerged later. In general, our findings support those who have adopted a turning-points approach to

stepfamily development (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001), in contrast to a clinical-prescriptive model in which all stepfamilies are envisioned to achieve a state of close and positive bonding with the passage of time: a few stepfamilies appear to move rapidly to a *complete triad* structure, others appear to move more slowly to that structure, and many do not progress there at all.

It was clear in the present study that these young-adult participants shared the view that the *complete triad* structure was ideal, perhaps manifesting a broader cultural ideology that favors communication openness as an elixir for all interpersonal ills (Katriel & Philipson, 1981; Parks, 1982). Rather than concluding that the other triadic communication structures are necessarily unsuccessful ones, since they do not realize the idealized *complete triad* structure, we urge stepfamily members and researchers alike to explore the possibility that multiple communication structures can be functional in established stepfamilies. Although stepfamily members often are cautioned by clinicians in particular to avoid comparing themselves to first-marriage families (e.g., Visher & Visher, 1979, 1993), researchers need the same encouragement. Stepfamily researchers have tended to frame stepfamilies from a deficit perspective in which they have been compared unfavorably to "traditional" nuclear families (Golish, 2003). Other structures may be functional, as well. For example, stepfamilies in which the mother occupies a strong gatekeeper role in limiting stepparent parenting, what our participants experienced as the *outsider triad* structure, can be functional for the stepfamily so long as it is compatible with expectations for the stepfather (e.g., Berger, 1995; Bray & Kelly, 1998).

From the perspective of our young-adult stepchildren, only the *adult-coalition triad* structure was uniformly regarded as negative. An implication of this negative reaction is that adults must be careful that their efforts to build a strong marital bond do not jeopardize the stepchild's sense of family belonging. Researchers have documented that parents often feel torn between their children and new partner (Afifi, 2003; Arnaut, Fromme, Stoll, & Felker, 2000), reflecting the difficulty of maintaining simultaneously the parent-child and spousal relationships.

The *linked triad* structure is a clear form of triangulation, or coalitions. However, unlike existing research that focuses on a child brought into a coalition with a parent who is unhappy with the marital dyad, our findings identify the residential parent brought into a coalition by a child who experiences a problematic stepparent-stepchild relationship characterized by misunderstanding if not hostility (Arnaut et al., 2000). In Bowenian terms, the ebb-and-flow of triangulation is normal; dysfunction results when triangulation becomes rigidified due to family stress (Hoffman, 1981). Thus, it is important for future researchers to determine whether this triangulated structure is a rigidified pattern of coping with family stress or whether it is a fluid structure that marks normal fluctuations in dyadic relations.

The triadic communication structures identified here need to be studied for their stability. Some researchers have indicated that communication with the stepparent is unstable due to underlying dialectical contradictions between stepchild feelings of both closeness and distance with the stepparent, dual desires for parenting and the absence of parenting from the stepparent, and simultaneous demands for both communicative openness and closedness (e.g., Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004). Such dialectical flux in the



stepparent-stepchild dyad could reverberate throughout the triad, resulting in substantial instability in the triadic communication structures. In addition, shifting triadic communication structures would seem likely whenever expectations are violated. When a stepparent oversteps the boundary of what the stepchild legitimates as appropriate parenting, a *complete triad* might temporarily resort to a *linked triad* or even an *outsider triad*. When a residential parent betrays a child's confidence in mediating with the stepparent, the stepchild might perceive an *adult-coalition triad*. Further, it seems quite possible that triadic communication structures could coexist, varying by topical domain. As stepfamily research lacks a longitudinal emphasis, we have little understanding of the ebb-and-flow dynamics of these triadic communication structures, and the results of this study certainly provide impetus for longitudinal work.

Although we identified four triads in the present study, it is logically possible to imagine eight different triadic communication structures: each constituent dyad in the triad (parent-child; parent-stepparent; stepparent-child) in either of two dichotomous states—a positively valenced or a negatively valenced communicative connection. At the empirical level, four of these theoretical possibilities were not evident in our participants' talk: (a) a triad in which all three dyadic relationships are negative, (b) a triad in which the only positive connection is that between the stepparent and his/her stepchild, (c) a triad in which only the link between the two spouses is negative, and (d) a triad in which only the link between the residential parent and his/her child is negative. Obviously, additional research is necessary to determine whether the absence of these four types is specific to the present data set or characteristic more generally of how young-adult stepchildren experience triadic communication structures in the stepfamily. Additional research is needed to discover if, for example, stepchildren perceive a triadic communication structure in which the only positive link in the structure is that between themselves and the stepparent, or the communication structure in which the stepparent is positioned as the intermediary between the child and his or her residential parent, or the structure in which the child feels that he or she is the intermediary between the parent and the stepparent.

While we have sought the perspective of young-adult stepchildren in the present study, additional research is needed to determine which of the eight logically possible triadic communication structures are identified among residential parents and stepparents. Except in circumstances in which the remarriage of adults is problematic, we would expect to find greater prevalence for triadic structures in which the communication link between spouses is characterized by positively valenced and direct interaction, rather than indirect communication through the child. Thus, from the adult perspective, the *outsider triad* identified by stepchildren is likely to be less evident than it was in this sample of young-adult stepchildren; in fact, the stepchild's *outsider triad* structure might accompany the adult perception of a strong marital bond with a rigid boundary around it. Among residential parents and stepparents, the perception of being caught in the middle identified in some research (e.g., Afifi, 2003; Golish, 2003) might argue for the salience of the *linked triad* among adults. How these triadic structures are perceived by both children and adults in stepfamilies is important to the interaction and relationships with one another in these families.

Our present study has several limitations that present opportunities for future researchers. First, we ignored the larger system within the stepfamily household and beyond. For example, we are unable to speak to the role that siblings and stepsiblings might play in the kinds of triadic communication structures that are enacted between parents, stepparents, and stepchildren, and scholars have identified stepsiblings as understudied (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). In addition, we do not know how communication with the nonresidential parent or the larger extended family network might affect the triadic communication structure within the stepfamily household (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006). Both of these latter two suggestions would broaden the boundary of the stepfamily system, embedding the parent-stepparent-stepchild triad in even large systemic contexts.

Second, it would also be useful to compare perceptions of triadic communication structures among stepchildren as compared with children who reside in first-marriage families. We will doubtless find overlap in the types of structures that are identified, and this will help us understand similarities and differences in these two family types (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). We suspect that first-marriage families might avail themselves of a fuller range of triadic structures, as a child has two parents in residence rather than one parent and a stepparent. Thus, we might find triads in which the child reports a more positive relationship with either parent over the other, unlike our participants in the present study who generally did not experience a more positive communicative relationship with the stepparent as opposed to the residential parent. Stepfamilies and first-marriage families might vary, as well, in the ebb-and-flow dynamics of various triadic communication structures. Stepfamilies and first-marriage families might hold different expectations for triadic communication. Some stepfamilies, for instance, might legitimate *outsider triad* or *linked triad* structures more so than would be the case among first-marriage families.

Third, our study is limited in its reliance on college-aged, Midwestern, and Caucasian stepchildren. Our sample of young-adult stepchildren had already moved away to college at the time of the interviews. It would be interesting to solicit the child's perspective among stepchildren who are still living at home in established stepfamilies. It might be easier and more functional for a child away at college to communicate only with one parent, or to use the parent as a conduit to a stepparent, when compared to the still-at-home adolescent. In addition, future researchers need to examine communication triads in other ethnic and cultural venues to see how, if at all, cultural differences influence interaction in these triads.

Despite its limitations, this study sheds exploratory insight into how the parent-stepparent-stepchild triad is perceived to communicate from the perspective of the young-adult child, and these results can serve as a heuristic tool for scholars interested in family systems. From a systems perspective, it is important to move beyond the study of dyads to more complex triadic structures.

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