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Building Steprelationships: Emerging Adult Stepchildrens' Perceptions and Experiences of their Stepparents

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**Building Steprelationships: Emerging Adult Stepchildrens'
Perceptions and Experiences of their Stepparents**

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HONORS THESIS

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Abstract

A grounded theory study was conducted with ten (7 female, 3 male) emerging-adults in stepfamilies to examine their perceptions and experiences of their stepparents, and what factors influence the development and maintenance of these steprelationships. Three primary categories emerged from the data: (1) Stepchildrens' perceptions of their stepparents presence in their lives, including both physical closeness and physical and emotional involvement (2) The perceived level of authenticity within the steprelationship, and (3) The level of clout stepchildren afforded to their stepparents' position within their lives and families. Additional factors found to influence the levels of presence, authenticity, and clout were stepchildrens' emotional maturity, cultural background, relationships with their biological parents, and feelings regarding the use and acquisition of money.

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INTRODUCTION

Demographers have estimated that when accounting for the various definitions of stepfamilies, including cohabitating but unmarried stepfamilies, nearly one third of all Americans are currently members of a stepfamily (Bumpass, Raley & Sweet, 1995). Research has shown that stepchildren benefit from supportive and warm relationships with stepparents and, when positive, these relationships have been found to not only promote academic and cognitive performance but also prevent negative internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Crosbie-Burnett & Giles, 1994; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; White & Gilbreth, 2001). However, building steprelationships, notably creating emotionally supportive and beneficial relationships between stepparents and stepchildren, still remains a difficult and understudied task (Coleman & Ganong, 2004). Many social institutions have yet to reform in ways that provide support for stepfamilies, and combined with a high level of ambiguity regarding stepfamily relations as compared to those in first-married families, results in an increased need for understanding how relationships grow and develop within remarried families (Cherlin, 1978; Stewart, 2005). The purpose of the current study was to examine what emerging adult stepchildren believe contributes to the creation and maintenance of a supportive and positive stepparent-stepchild relationship. More specifically, we also focused on affinity-seeking and maintenance behaviors, which is the process of getting another person to like you and maintaining a satisfactory relationship that continues this experience of liking.

Age and Developmental Stage

Affinity-seeking and maintaining behaviors in stepchild-stepparent relationships must be understood in relation to context. One of the most important contexts is the family developmental stage and position of the life cycle of various stepfamily members. The large number of divorces occur within the first 3 years of marriage, and demographers predict that in the United states 33% of all children will live with a stepparent before the age of 18 (Visser et al, 1997) This translates into stepfamilies having children at a variety of ages, ranging through infants, toddlers, teens, young adults and even adult children . In the

context very young children, remarried families generally find it easier for stepparents to take on a traditional parent-like role. Children who become part of a stepfamily as infants or at a very young age will likely lack any memory of their parents first marriage, and have yet to be socialized to feel strange or different about having multiple parental figures in their lives, should their biological father choose to remain an active role in their lives.

Toddler's and elementary school age children are more likely to have a memory of their biological family, and their lives may be more disrupted by the divorce and remarriage of one or both of their parents. Researchers have repeatedly highlighted the importance for stepparents to engage in activities that stepchildren will find enjoyable when trying to build affinity in steprelationships (Ganong et al. 1999, Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). This can, at times, cause difficulties among opposite sex stepparents if their younger stepchildren particularly like engaging in gendered activities. Families where children are in the pre-teens and middle-school years are caught in between several transitions and adding a family form transition greatly increases the stress on these stepfamilies families. Children in this age group are just beginning to become increasingly involved with peer-groups at school, but still find large amounts of their identity in the family (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). A divorce or remarriage at this age can not only disrupt the core of their family identity and their relationships with their biological parents, but may also upset the delicate connections they have begun to create within peer-groups (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). Children this age are the most likely to experience loyalty conflicts between biological and stepparents the strongest (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002; Mills, 1984). There are a number of barriers that may exist in the construction and maintenance of affinity within stepchild-stepparent relationships, and it is suggested that these barriers often increase during much of stepchildrens' youth. However, when stepchildren move out of their parents' or stepparents' homes, research suggests that conflict can be reduced and stepparents and stepchildren may better be able to develop a close or supportive relationship (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Marsiglio, 2004). For this reason, this study focused upon a population of emerging adults, common traits taught in college are those of critical reflection and the reconstruction and interpretation of past events. This study hoped to capitalize upon these traits and to

further explore how and why the transition to emerging adulthood might result in changes of stepchildrens' perceptions or descriptions of their relationships and affinity for their stepparents.

Steprelationships and Affinity-Development

Affinity seeking is the process of an individual using communication and actions in order to get others to like or feel positive about them and is often related to compliance gaining , or getting another to listen and agree with oneself (Bell & Daly, 1996). In the stepparent-stepchild relationship, the burden is often placed upon stepparents to forge the bond between themselves and stepchildren, as the stepparent is often an outsider around the family boundaries of biological parent and child. Adults are expected to make overtures in order to form ties, however, children's responses such overtures can play an important role in the course of how steprelationships develop and whether a stepparent will continue to make attempts at forming a relationship (Ganong et al., 1999). There are several goals usually underlying affinity-seeking behavior such as information seeking and giving, however affinity-seeking can also go hand in hand with deception and relational disengagement (Bell & Daly, 1996). These underhanded components to affinity-seeking techniques can help explain why some stepchildren and stepfathers are reluctant to accept their new relatives attempts to form positive bonds. Not only is it possible stepchildren may view stepparents as outsiders, but stepchildren may also experience loyalty conflicts between their biological parent and stepparent, making them less receptive towards attempts at friendship. This is especially common in the beginning stages of stepfamily formation, the time when stepparents are most likely to make attempts to gain their stepchildren's affinity. The frequency of these attempts will generally taper off after multiple rejections, making the chances of a positive and healthy bond between stepparents and stepchildren less likely and more difficult to create (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992 and Ganong, Coleman, Fine & Martin, 1999).

One of few studies to explore such behavior, Ganong, Coleman, Fine & Martin (1999) studied the affinity-seeking and maintaining efforts of stepparents to understand how stepfamilies have worked to build these relationships and to determine what actions were more or less effective. Their study particularly focused on what behaviors and activities stepparents engaged in and the stepparents'

awareness of their behavior in making such attempts to build their relationship with stepchildren. The researchers also explored how stepchildren reacted to their stepparents' attempts to develop affinity and what behaviors received a positive response as compared to those that elicited no or negative responses.

Ganong et al. (1999) described three forms of stepparents in relation to affinity seeking within stepfamilies; nonseekers, early affinity seekers, and continuous affinity seekers. Nonseekers primary focus was on the marital relationship and generally played little if any role in their stepchildren's lives, most acts of kindness towards children was in an effort to please their spouse or reward their stepchild rather than to build a relationship with them. Early affinity seekers would likely fall into Mills (1984) classification of "acting like a parent" too early in the relationship, these stepparents tried to build a relationship with their stepchildren but then stopped once taking on a parent-like role. This often resulted in resentment among their stepchildren and may explain Hetherington & Clingempeel (1992) observation of stepfathers who began their relationships with stepchildren as warm and peer-like but ended up with increased externalizing behaviors and poor adjustment among stepchildren. Continuous affinity seekers, not only made deliberate attempts to form and build a relationship with stepchildren, but they continued to maintain this friend-like relationship despite the stepparent taking a parent-like role within the family (Ganong et al., 1999). An important observation regarded the role of biological parents of stepchildren as potentially blocking affinity seeking and affinity maintaining behaviors on the part of the stepparents, and stepfathers in particular (Ganong et al., 1999). While it is adaptable for mothers to function as gatekeepers to protect their children from unnecessary strife and uncommitted relationships, they function as the most significant common bond between stepfather and stepchild and in so, are able to function as relationship facilitators (Ganong et al., 1999). Stepparents may also face a danger of "emotional burnout" or "role overload" if they exert all of their effort and resources into winning the affection of children, it was deemed important for stepparents to reach out to their children regularly, but to do so in a way that does not compromise their self identity (Whitsett & Land, 1992).

Ganong et al. (1999) were unable to determine why some stepchildren recognized their stepparents' efforts and others did not. They originally postulated that negative comments made by non-residential

parents and interactions between these parents and the children would undermine the steprelationship. However, in their study interactions with a non-residential parent who spoke negatively of a stepparent did not explain differences in stepchildren's responses to their stepparents' affinity-seeking efforts. While some stepchildren whose non-residential parent made negative comments about their stepparent did have a poor or distant relationship with their stepparent, several stepchildren in similar situations had close and positive relationships with their stepparents. From this Ganong and colleagues concluded that there is a need for follow up research in order to account for what influences stepchildren to be more or less accepting of relationships with stepparents.

As of today, little to no follow up research has occurred other than an attempt to quantify and measure what stepchild-specific and stepparent-specific variables may influence affinity-seeking behavior (Larsen, 2005). This study focuses upon stepchildren's subjective perceptions and experiences of their stepparents in order to create an innovative framework for understanding stepchild-stepparent relationships and affinity-development. This research was guided by the following research questions:

1. What from a stepchild's perspective seems to promote a sense of affinity with their stepparents? How does a sense of affinity develop between stepparent and child?
2. What type of role or relationship do stepchildren want to have with their stepparent?
3. How does stepchildren's perceptions of their stepparents actions and understanding of the role of a stepparent, relate to the stepchild's subjective experience of their relationship with their stepparent?
4. What contributes to stepchildren being more or less open to the formation of relationships with stepparents?

METHODS

Participants

Participants were recruited from undergraduates at the main campus of a large land-grant university in the northeastern United States through fliers and an announcement sent over a campus-wide list serve. A grounded theory approach was used to analyze the results of interviews with ten (7 Female and 3 Male) participants, which allowed for a wide variety of family experiences. The sample was not limited by sex, age that they acquired a stepparent, nor stepfamily type. Table 1.1 provides information about the participants.

Participant #	Sex	Age	Age Acquired Stepparent	Family Form
1	Female	20	SF 3, SM 10	Complex* residential stepfather, non-residential stepmother
2	Female	21	10	Cohabiting residential stepfather
3	Female	25	16	Non-residential stepmother
4	Male	22	SF 4, SM 18, SM 20	Complex* residential stepfather, 2 sequential non-residential stepmothers
5	Male	25	SM 12, SF 14	Complex* residential stepfather, non-residential stepmother
6	Male	21	6	Non-residential stepmother
7	Female	21	18	Residential stepmother
8	Female	19	12	Residential stepfather
9	Female	25	SF 19, SM 20	Complex* stepfamily both residential/nonresidential at various points
10	Female	20	18	Non-residential stepmother

Table 1.1

*Complex denotes a family in which there are multiple remarried parents

Procedure

Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured format with questions meant to elicit detailed explanations of their perceptions of the affinity seeking and maintaining process within their own relationships and their cognitive thoughts and perceptions of their stepparents. The interview followed a chronological path beginning with their first recollections of meeting their future stepparent with some attention to their awareness of their parent's and stepparents' courtship and remarriage and finishing with

their current relationship with their stepparent. The interview process was conducted as an informal conversation between the researcher and a single participant around topics derived from the research questions. Not every question was asked in the same order during every interview or in the same way; questions were asked in conjunction with the flow of conversation in order to allow the interviewee to be as descriptive as possible. The interview attempted to grasp the history of the stepchild and stepparent relationship and the most memorable interactions in a way that not only captures what happened, but also how the individual felt and thought about their experiences. The interview was meant to elicit descriptions of participants' thoughts and feelings at that time, as well as how their thoughts may have changed in retrospect. Sample questions include: Describe the first time you met your stepparent, what was your initial impressions of them? How did they try to get to know you better? And, What advice would you give to someone whose parents just got remarried? The interviewer asked appropriate follow-up questions if something warranted further exploration or clarification.

Data Analysis

Coding and analyzing began during data collection and the interview process; the development of a theory grounded in the data was modeled from (Cresswell, 1988) and Strauss and Corbin (1988). This use of grounded theory has been found especially useful when attempting to understand family processes (Morse & Richards, 2002). I personally conducted and audiotaped every interview. After every interview, the tapes were transcribed verbatim. I then coded transcripts for emerging patterns and kept a collection of memos. I also met bi-weekly with an advisor who was provided with non-coded or evaluated transcripts and interpretations were compared. After categories and codes began to form, member checks were used and participants in later interviews were asked questions addressing whether their own experiences fit or matched those of earlier participants. As a theory was developed and new data was gained, changes were made to the coding categories and the developing model.

RESULTS

Developing Affinity

For the purposes of this study affinity is conceptualized as the creation and continuation of a process of stepchildren liking their stepparents. There are three main categories that were identified as playing a primary role in the formation of stepchildren's level of affinity for their stepparents these are presence, authenticity and clout. The combination and various levels of these three categories resulted in the level of affinity stepchildren held with their stepparents. In reflecting on the growth and development of stepchild-stepparent relationships participants described levels of affinity falling along a range that varied throughout the entire history of their relationships. Several participants described at times very strong feelings of caring for and appreciating their relationships with their stepparents. These same participants at times described their relationship with their stepparents as being confrontational in nature, or merely tolerating one another. Affinity did not develop in a linear fashion and stepchildren's descriptions of their relationships with their stepparents over time often fluctuated. A stepparent's presence in the participants lives formed the basis for the stepchild-stepparent relationship and so a stepparents perceived presence was the foundation for any further developments in the stepchild-stepparent relationship. Overtime participants' perceptions of their stepparents' authenticity solidified, however changes in emotional maturity, life stage or other events could at times cause radical changes. The interplay of presence and authenticity, and its fluctuation was often mirrored in the level of clout stepchildren afforded to their stepparents and to the importance of their stepparents' relationship in their lives. Social capital that did not come from stepparents being seen as authentic individuals could also be created through their familial associations with the participant and a recognition or respect for the position stepparents held in their family. The outcome is a variable level of affinity that is related to these three categories but also clearly influenced by individual differences such as cultural background, emotional maturity, differences surrounding the use of money and individuals relationships with other family members. The final model is presented below in Figure 1.1:

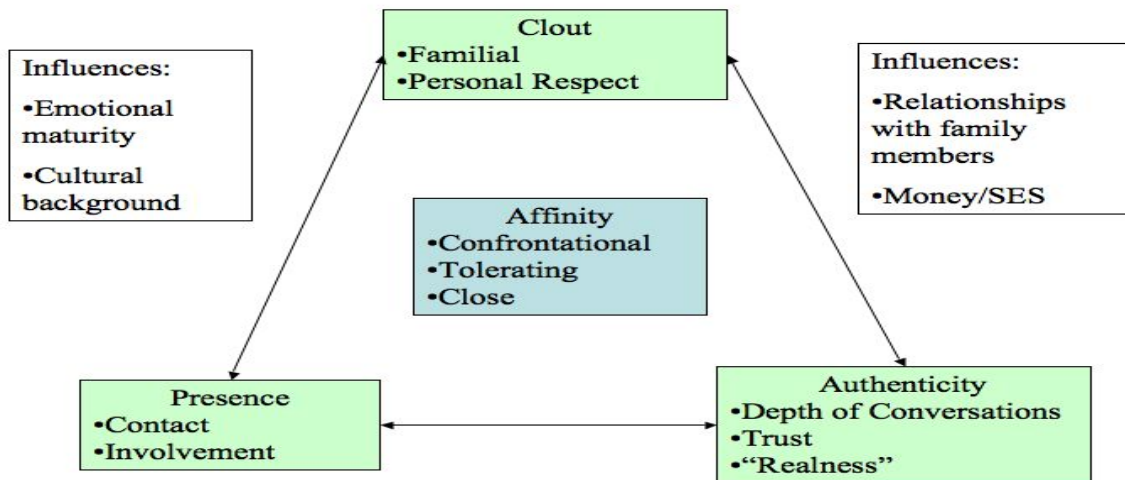


Figure 1.1 (Model for Stepchild-Stepparent Affinity Development)

Presence

The presence of stepparents in their lives was the most common theme brought up by stepchildren throughout each interview. Presence can be split into two subcategories. The first of these, contact, is the frequency of physical proximity between individuals within a relationship. This subcategory was constructed out of how often stepchildren described seeing or calling their stepparent, and was also used to code items such as the length of time stepchildren had a stepparent. The second sub-category of presence, involvement, is the process of sharing one’s life experience, resources and space with other individuals. Often, involvement requires being present as well, but the two are distinct categories. A present stepparent may attend their stepchild’s soccer game, in contrast an involved stepparent might coach the soccer team, or spend time with their stepchild teaching them skills or technique or discussing with their stepchild their favorite soccer teams. Due to modern technology, presence does not require in person contact, it can also involve talking over the phone, instant messaging/texting or e-mail communications. Participants described their stepparent’s presence as moving along a range from absent to intrusive. As stepchildren described their relationship with their stepparents, their level of presence varied along this continuum. Steprelationships that never formed would fit into the “absent” category.

Presence could also be described as sporadic, comfortable or intrusive and generally which description any particular behavior fell into depended on what each individual participant felt were and were not appropriate levels of contact or involvement. Presence as a whole, rather than being static or easily measured, is a highly subjective variable that varies across individuals and may manifest itself differently across relationships.

Absence

An absent stepparent had no acknowledgeable presence in stepchildren's lives and may have only existed in reality as hypothetical. The most common reason for a stepparent to be absent is due to an absent biological parent as demonstrated in the following exchange while discussing a participant's family history and biological father's relationships.

I: Is he remarried?

P: Umm, I actually haven't heard from him in, like gotten actual information, so I don't know, but it's possible. (Female, age 19 [8])

However, a stepchild can still be knowledgeable of an absent stepparent, one participant discussed both of her parents' new partners but only acknowledged one of them as a stepparent, due to the lack of her father's partner's presence in her own life.

P: He has a girlfriend now, they've been together for a really long time too, I don't know why neither of them get married, but they've been together with their partners for like, he's been together with his girlfriend N for like more than 5 years I would say at least (...)

I: Does he live with N now?

P: No, ahh sorta, it's kind of strange, she actually lives in [European Country] and he like, he has his own business and he does consulting work and he actually has more business in Europe. So they do kind of live together in that they spend a lot of time together, probably like 6 months of the year together in the same residence, in one way or another. Either she is here in America or he's in France living with her.

I: But you don't consider her a stepmother like you kind of do L?

P: No, no

I: and why is that?

P: Probably because I haven't spent a long period of time living with her in the same house

(Female, age 21 [2])

Presence is the foundation of any stepchild-stepparent relationship as it is the presence of one another in each other's lives that is the basis for any form of relationship or affinity development between stepchildren and their stepparents. A stepparent may be experienced as absent if their level of both contact and involvement is none, or zero.

Sporadic

A more common low end of presence could be categorized as a "sporadic" level of contact or involvement. It was common for several participants to only see their stepparents one or two times during the year, generally, at a family or holiday gathering. Several participants discussed their contact with stepparents as occurring less and less often as time, developmental stage and relationships changed, this was especially common among older stepchildren, or stepchildren whose parents had only remarried just recently. Geography also played a clear role in the level of contact stepchildren experienced:

I only really see my family period during family reunions and holidays, my mother lives in [Midwestern state], my father lives in [Midwestern city], my sister in... [Southeastern state] and my brother's in (...) school, so umm, I see my stepfamily, once a year, at Christmas. [And] In August (...) and New years, we go to the state fair every year as a family. (Female, age 25 [9])

Often, this was not a starting point for a stepparent's presence in their lives. Changes in level of contact were also a result of relationship difficulties. One participant described the aftermath of having a strained relationship while living with her father and stepmother over the summer:

I still only see her sporadically.(...), like right now I'm only seeing them like twice a year, so...I'm not even sure if I'm going out [there] next summer, so like after Christmas I'm not sure like the next time I'll see her or my stepsiblings or it might not be til like the following Christmas so everything's kind of just like up in the air right now. (Female, age 20 [10])

How remarried biological parents were perceived as defining steprelationships in different ways had a large influence on stepparents presence, this was particularly salient when discussing biological fathers.

My (emphasis) Dad, doesn't consider me to be family to my stepmother. Umm, so I never, I don't know, we do holidays and stuff together but that's about it. And like, I'll hang out with my dad sometimes and he'll be like C's not coming and I'll be like, why isn't C coming she's my stepmother? Yes C should come to my graduation, a thing like that, just doesn't occur to them. She's kind of like a separate entity. (Female, age 20 [1])

Other participants found themselves forced into a more sporadic relationship by their biological fathers due a strained relationship with their stepmothers:

I...started acting out. Umm, it was to the point were he, said that he didn't want me to come over any more, because I was being so mean to her. Umm, and that lasted for a few years." (Male, age 25 [5])

Yea...the visitations when we got older, you know I don't really remember how it happened. I think my father, I think my father, A: wanted a break because we were a handful, and two: he could somewhat sense that we really were not getting along between all the arguments and fights and stuff, that visitations kind of got shorter. Uhh, two weeks out of the summer got one week, and every other weekend instead or, one week in the month instead of every other weekend. Umm, and the last thing that we did was like one week night dinner went down to like every other week. So I don't know, it kinda shortened out. (Male, age 21 [6])

This same pattern was not apparent, or described among participants regarding their relationships with their biological mothers. Difficulties were experienced more often when stepchildren had described their initial impressions of their stepparents presence as intrusive. A more sporadic level of contact was often adaptive in lessening conflict over family resources and space. This adaptive formation combined with the often hectic schedules of emerging adults and changing geographic locations as they attend school or find work meant that sporadic levels of presence were an incredibly common experience among participants.

Comfortable

Like it felt very fitting, like something, as opposed to being out of place I felt in place, comfortable, content. I felt content. (Female, age 21 [2])

Participants that described their stepparents presence in their lives as comfortable were, as the above participant put it, content with their time spent with their stepparents. However, stepchildren who did describe their stepparents presence as comfortable experienced variable amounts of contact and involvement ranging from only once every couple of weeks, to nearly every day. There was a large variance between participants even if they described similar levels of contact. Stepparents perceived involvement was the key-differentiating factor in whether a stepchild felt comfortable with their stepparents presence or if it was described as intrusive. Both of the following two participants describe comfortable levels of presence, yet the behaviors they describe could easily be constructed as being on opposite sides of a measure of contact:

Whenever like something happens even if it's like you know, my little brother got accepted to baseball team that ends up being like an hour-long conversation, about just what's happening. I stay in contact at least a couple times a week. (Male, age 22 [4])

Like if I email, I don't usually specifically email him, I more usually email my mom and sometimes I copy him. Sometimes if I'm online I'll see something and be like that's something L would really like, so I'll send that to him. But we don't, we don't really talk as much, when we're home we hang out more, but I feel less of a need to like keep up my talking to him, my relationship with him as I do with my brother, my mom and my dad. But I do go back a lot and things pick back up when I'm home. (Female, age 21 [2])

Comfortable relationships are at a point where stepchildren are satisfied with their stepparent's presence in their lives. This is not an endpoint for presence development, but a comfortable presence is often indicative of the steprelationship finding a harmony or balance that in most cases, is easily maintained. The length of a steprelationship also gives a decisive advantage in the likelihood of the

development of a comfortable relationship, and participants who had gained their stepparent at a young age acknowledged this:

He was always there for everything when I was growing up, You know like we're gonna go ride the bike, we're gonna go play on the swings, we're gonna do this, we're gonna do that. So yea, He was just always there, always very supportive and very very involved with everything from like discipline to finances and everything like that. (Female, age 20 [1])

It's also clear that a comfortable presence level for stepchildren who had gained a stepparent when they were young often were usually comfortable with much higher levels of contact and involvement with their stepparents. Cultural background played an important role in the latent expectations and the level of normality of stepparent involvement. A stepchild who has been primed to expect a stepparents involvement was much more likely to afford clout to their stepparent, and were more likely to feel comfortable with a level of presence of their stepparents in their life that might be described as intrusive by others. Such a primer was often linked to the culture in which a participant had been raised, whether that was the broader culture of a particular society, or the individuals' familial culture within which they were raised.

Intrusive

The Intrusive description of stepparents was frequently the earliest perception described by stepchildren as they discussed the history of their relationships. Perceptions of an intrusive relationship were defined by high levels of contact or involvement at times when stepchildren felt such high levels were inappropriate. For example when one participant described meeting her future stepmother for the first time:

Yes it was horrific. Because my dad didn't tell me that she was going to be there, and my dad and I were having a very very strained relationship after a very very horrible divorce. And, so uhh I went there for the weekend and she just was there like the whole weekend and it really really bothered me, we got in a huge fight. It was kinda immature looking back now, but at the time I felt pretty justified in my emotions. (Female, age 25 [3])

Intrusiveness was often accompanied by a sense of a loss of control by the stepchild. It was very common for intrusiveness and the presence associated with it to not only be about physical contact or proximity but to have much more to do with psychological space as seen in this follow up:

I: Well what were you feeling?

P: Just like betrayal. Like that he wouldn't include me in the decision in whether she would be there or not. Umm cause even if he had been like I have this friend, she's coming over for dinner, I would have been like ok. But like I didn't just, like it was a weekend that I was there the whole time, versus like going out and meeting her and it was very much like, this is how it's going to...the way it's gonna be now. (Female, age 25 [3])

The statement that the participant may have been more accepting if she had been involved in the decision about meeting her future stepmother is merely hypothetical. That portion of the statement is more indicative of the change of this particular steprelationship to a more comfortable level that occurred later. However, the feelings of a loss of control, and the perceived inappropriateness of this first meeting were very clear. Other stepparents that seemed to take an active involvement in child rearing early in their relationship also resulted in similar feelings of loss or confusion among stepchildren:

[For] some reason we were not allowed to watch TV anymore at my father's house, no more TV and, uhh, no really weird things, like we used to have to sit and be quiet for four hours of the night, and you know the night time we wanted to do something, go out and do something (Male, age 21 [6])

Besides a loss in control, stepchildren described their stepparents as intrusive when they felt their biological parents' new relationship was drawing away from their own relationship with their parent. This was particularly common among participants who had lived with their parents as single-parents for some time. A strong parent-child bond and a series of dyadic rituals meant that the introduction of a new person was seen as a clear threat to the relationship:

Well cause that just meant like, that just meant more time with him and less time for my mom and I to be together. To spend, have mom-daughter time. (Female, age 19 [8])

On the other hand, intrusiveness was also a common feeling among stepchildren who felt they never had the chance to form a dyadic bond with one of their biological parents, especially in the aftermath of an emotional divorce. These participants described a desire to spend time alone with their biological parent, and often would later take their frustrations out on the “intruding” stepparent:

Like every time we went out to dinner, I was like dad I just want to be with you, and he was like well S is coming and I was like well I don't want to be with S right now I want to be with you. And he never gave me that time ever, ever. Even now he has a hard time doing that which is kind of strange.
(Female, age 25 [3])

This came up in several of the interviews, and it appeared that stepparents who had knowledge or training in emotional management, or jobs, such as being a minister or counselor, had a decisive advantage in sometimes being able to help stepchildren negotiate repairing or building a stronger bond with their biological parents. Those lacking this advantage resulted in a continuous struggle for some participants and it took a large degree of emotional maturity for stepchildren to self-manage the often-confusing interplay of post-divorce relationships. Only a few of the participants described such a case, and it generally was due to a change in their cognition regarding relationships with their stepparents, and required the movement to a more sporadic presence that was easier to manage.

When I was 20 or so, I decided that I was gonna contact my dad again and try really hard to work on it time instead of being a brat and umm and it slowly since then has been getting better and better. I went to his fiftieth birthday party, and maybe he's fifty-five I don't know, but I went to his fiftieth birthday party and it was just really nice, it was really cautious, I was very scared and I didn't know what to do. But then I just started talking to them and going out to dinner with them slowly. (Female age 25 [3])

Stepchildren's experiences and perceptions of their stepparents' presence in their lives involved both the how often (contact) and how much (involvement). Expectations and cultural norms highly influenced stepchildren's experiences, however over time either changes in behavior or changes in cognition allowed for differences in the perceived level of stepparents presence. Without presence, the ability to develop

affinity in stepchild-stepparent relationships is impossible. Additionally, perceived over involvement by stepparents and conflict over the use of physical and psychological space within the family were detrimental to the development of affinity within steprelationships. Finding a way to negotiate a comfortable level of presence set the stage for better developments of authenticity, clout and subsequent sense of affinity. Moving to a sporadic level of contact allowed for lower chances of conflict over the amount of presence and involvement of a stepparent. Additionally, a sporadic presence created space for the development of other components of the stepchild-stepparent relationship, and was often a stepping-stone for stepchildren to move past a confrontational relationship with their stepparent.

Authenticity

Each of the participants also addressed the level of authenticity they perceived in their stepparents, and in their relationship with their stepparents. There were three subcategories that made up the perceived authenticity of stepparents. The first of these was the depth of conversation participants' felt they engaged in with their stepparents. While discussing the weather or small-talk such as "how was your day" could function as safe beginning topics, participants described it as decidedly false or fake if their conversations never progressed past this point. Keeping conversations at a surface level often allowed stepchildren to remain civil with their stepparents, however this barrier meant to keep the peace also prevented them from attaining a deeper understanding of their stepparents. Trust was the second and crucial component of stepparents' perceived authenticity. Being able to trust their stepparent was often a key turning point in the stepchild-stepparent relationship as the stepparent moved from the stranger or acquaintance role to a more friend or family-like position. The final aspect of authenticity was "realness" more so than being able to trust a stepparent or their perceived depth, a stepparents' "realness" was how stepchildren gauged the honesty of how a stepparent presented themselves. This meant that stepchildren were often questionable about stepparents they felt were "trying too hard" or whom they experienced as "two-faced". Stepchildren described appreciating authenticity and "realness" from their stepparents, even if that "realness" was an authentic dislike or anger with the participant. Together, these three aspects combined to create stepchildren's overall experiences and perceptions of their stepparents. Not

necessarily a result of stepparents' actions, stepchildren's perceptions of their stepparents authenticity was often reflected in the intricacy with which they described their stepparents character and could also reflect stepchildren's ability to empathize with their stepparent's position. As such, time and becoming more emotionally mature could allow stepchildren to reframe their past interactions with their stepparents and allow for changes in authenticity over time. Authenticity fell into three broad descriptions. Most participants described their initial experiences of their stepparents as suspicious. As relationships grew and developed, stepchildren either described their stepparents and their steprelationship as being theatrical or becoming more personal and so more "real".

Suspicious

You have to really, slowly do little bits to build, you know, you were raised from a baby maybe, by these parents or whoever, and you've had so much time, you know, and you don't even know this person, they're a stranger (Female, age 25 [3])

Suspicion was a common sentiment expressed by stepchildren when they described their very early and first meetings with their future stepparents. This was an especially common disposition described by stepchildren whose stepparents entered their lives during their middle childhood. At the beginning of their relationships, potential future stepparents really are little more than strangers, as such it is understandable that many of the participants treated them as such, with some variability depending on the cultural background and age of the participant. It was also common for participants who described their initial relationships as suspicious to have spent some time during which their biological parent had not been dating and had been perceived as primarily focused on parenting their children. These participants often felt it had been a part of their duty to be suspicious of their stepparent and to be looking out for the best interests of their biological parent. They also may have had a slight bias towards seeing the negative in their parent's potential future partner as one participant discussed the first time she met her future stepfather:

I was just very, trying to be very perceptive when I met him. Umm...and...I don't know if I was just judgmental or...but I was a little hesitant to like accept him at first. (Female, age 19 [8])

Presence of a stepparent has an important role in the development of authenticity, as the level of contact and involvement can greatly influence the ability of stepchildren to evaluate the authenticity of their stepparents and it is to be expected that dimensions of any individual's personality tend to slowly reveal themselves over time. Once stepchildren had gauged their stepparent, as either a threat, or a bonus, they often transitioned into viewing their stepparent as either theatrical and thus a potential danger, or "real" and so their suspicions subsided.

Theatrical

Relationships described as theatrical were often characterized by low levels of each subcategory of authenticity. Participants who described their relationships as theatrical often felt like their conversations with their stepparents rarely approached a level of depth, and that both they and their stepparents were holding back from engaging one another fully in their relationships. This was best characterized by one participant's description:

You know like it wasn't like oh I did this and this happened, she wouldn't like kind of, put her own personality into the conversation, so...I kind of didn't really get to know her that well because uhh, I don't think I got to know her. (Male, age 22 [4])

Participants may have described the relationship as having some sort of barrier from developing further, or simply felt that they were unable to trust their stepparent.

It felt just not right, and...when we were younger, there was, it was very discomforting, now, it's more like there's a façade and we just put an act on. (Male, age 21 [6])

Conflict within the stepparent-stepchild relationship was usually a result of either struggles over resources and negotiating presence or personality differences. Several stepchildren felt they could no longer be open or authentic with their stepparents because it was destructive, causing high levels of conflict or resulting in them being punished. One participant noted that she and her stepmother may have simply been too different and that misunderstandings were more detrimental to the relationship than simply pretending she had no opinion or nothing to say:

I kind of stopped talking to her like after being out there, cause I was like if I say something then she's gonna take it the wrong way and then tell my dad and I'm gonna get yelled at, so basically I just stopped talking to her. (Female, age 20 [10])

In this way, developing a relationship as theatrical was an adaptive change that helped lower conflict within the stepfamily. Avoiding disruptive topics meant that the household is able to remain peaceful and participants could better tolerate their stepparent by steering conversations away from emotionally infused topics. However, because of this façade and distancing within the stepchild-stepparent relationship affinity development was also limited.

“Real”

Being real involved a combination of depth, trust and a general feeling of sincerity within the stepchild-stepparent relationship. Most importantly, participants felt their stepparents were more “real” if they felt their stepparents were presenting themselves honestly. A steprelationship that was described as “real” was also likely to be complimented by having negotiated a comfortable level of presence.

Describing his relationship with his stepfather one participant noted:

I've you know fond memories of uhh, just being able to discuss any real, any matter and I felt comfortable with him, I don't think I felt uncomfortable with any matter with him. (Male, age 25 [5])

Stepchildren seemed to highly value the honesty, sincerity and authenticity of stepparents, and it is probably understandable that it was very difficult for some stepparents to be so authentic and open with their stepchildren. When describing their stepparents, stepchildren described authentic moments as often being moments of vulnerability. Thus relationships that had been characterized as difficult made it less and less likely that participants' stepparents would open up and reveal such vulnerability.

Authenticity was important to the development of affinity within stepchild-stepparent relationships. Those that lacked a sense of authenticity in their relationship were likely to either develop and maintain a confrontational relationship or if a level of familial clout was established, move to tolerating their relationship with their stepparent. A stepchild who perceived their stepparent as authentic and

appreciated and respected their stepparent as an individual resulted in a stepparent being described with a high level of clout.

Clout

Clout is a form of familial social capital that stepparents were often indirectly afforded by participants. There were two forms of clout that participants assigned to their stepparents, familial, based on family relationships and clout based on their stepparents' individual personalities, which was experienced as either respected or incompatible. The level of clout stepchildren afforded their stepparents was often more apparent in their demeanor and the change in a participant's attitudes when discussing their stepparents. Those stepparents with little clout were reported as displaying body language that was often angry and characterized their stepparents in a negative or dismissive way. When discussing stepparents with high levels of clout, participants eyes may have lit up or their excitement, respect, and appreciation was apparent in their tone of voice. Perhaps the best example of clout can be found in the following description one participant gave to a question regarding how others may have influenced her relationship with her stepfather:

Hmm, I don't even know if this answers the question. But my stepdad, growing up since he was there since the time I was little. Became you know the role of the father in the house and he did most of the like discipline stuff umm and my mom would normally like back him up with that. So like I don't know I was grounded and I was yelled at you know typical stuff when I was little. My stepdad is very, stern, very loving man, but very serious about things. Umm, and he was like a crazy kid when he was younger so he's like I'm gonna lay down the law and this is the way it's going to be. So if I was grounded for 2 weeks, like I was grounded for 2 weeks to the day, it wasn't like ok you've done 4 days you're good. And sometimes my friends would come over the house and they would be intimidated by him. Because he's not this like really cuddly guy who wants to jump up and down all the time you know. So sometimes they would be scared of him. But I look back on it now and I'm like, wow I'm a

really good kid today and I work hard and I have you know like good relationships and all that and I owe that all to him and you know the good behaviors and stuff he instilled in me. (Female Age 20 [1])

The participant recognized and appreciated the influence her stepfather had played in her life and has a high level of respect for his role as a parental model. Clout based on a stepparents individual personality was highly interrelated with a stepparents perceived authenticity. High levels of clout could be demonstrated by a participant discussing going to their stepparent with problems they felt were of personal importance and having a strong desire to know their stepparents' input and heed their advice. If participants did not develop individual respect for their stepparents, they usually described their stepparents as being incompatible due to differences in personality or likes and dislikes. It was also possible for stepparents to expend, or lose clout from their stepchildren, often through a change in a level of trust and perceived authenticity. However, just because a participant felt that their stepparent was incompatible they may still have afforded their stepparent familial clout. Familial clout develops in a distinctly different process than individual respect. Familial clout is social capital afforded to stepparents due to the importance of their position within their family, whether it is as the new spouse of a biological parent or as the parent of a half-sibling.

Familial

Family members and familial relations played an especially important role in the development of stepparents' clout. Many steprelationships that began as confrontational settled into tolerating or even close in nature once stepchildren realized the happiness their stepparent brought to their parents or siblings lives. A number of the participants realized that they needed to treat their stepparents differently and respectfully after seeing the happiness they brought their parents. Sometimes they were happy for their parents and so gave clout to their stepparents due to the pleasure they knew it brought their family.

The main benefit would be like my dad is happier. Which makes it like easier for the rest of us.

Cause when he, when he was a single parent, and he was like right after my parents got divorced, he was like really miserable. Like it was kind of nice cause we got to spend a lot of time with him. But,

like he just wasn't happy and it's not really fun to be around people who aren't happy. You know, so I'd say that's the main, like general benefit. (Female, age 21 [7])

Other times, participants realized that their stepparents had a key role, and with that role they were to be treated with a certain amount of respect, even if they did not respect them individually. This was a common example in stepmother families, where after a series of conflicts between stepchildren and their stepmother a father intervened and demanded his children show respect for his spouse. This family rule was best demonstrated by one participant's description:

I...I really just viewed her as a, you know, my dad's spouse, I viewed, when I was finally allowed to you know go back over there, I...you know respected her and I viewed her as someone, that I should show respect, but I never viewed her as someone who...would be an authority figure in my life. (Male, age 25 [5])

Familial clout could also be extremely low, especially if a biological parent had brought the participant into a coalition that was in stark opposition to a stepparent. While this did occur, it was also possible for unmarried biological parents to help form clout for stepparents such as in the following example:

Uhh, and my mother really didn't say anything, she, I knew it hurt her, but she never like said, oh your stepmother's a bitch or whatever like that. She said no, she's your stepmother and that's your father you need to spend the time with them, it was always really supportive (Male, age 21 [6])

Individually Respected

Clout based on individual respect was extremely powerful for several of the participants. These participants often greatly admired some aspect of their stepparents, and greatly appreciated the niche that they had been able to fulfill within their lives. One participant described how his stepfather was able to function as an outlet of discussion and insight unlike other adults in his life:

He, was understanding, uhh, he, uhh, had an incredible intellect and he would basically, you know if I, if I was talking to him about a certain problem, you know he would help me look at it from you know various angles, and try to just figure out, you know the solutions. (Male, age 25 [5])

This finding of a position and place for his stepfather within his life stood in stark contrast to his relationship with his stepmother which remained distant and indifferent over time. Sometimes participants appreciated and respected the individuality of their stepparents when they found shared interests and common ground that they could connect on. At other times, it was the unique differences of stepparents that participants described as what made them interesting and respected. One participant described her appreciation of the uniqueness of her stepfather:

Like my dad's more conservative he wears flannel you know really down to earth. Umm and L is like, really like, he's really cool, he umm, he really likes radiohead, he had cool hair, no, no he had long hair then I think, like long hair in a ponytail so that was way different from my dad. (Female, age 21 [2])

However, it was also possible for stepchildren to not view their stepparents' unique characteristics as a positive and respectful trait, instead these stepparents would be understood as being incompatible with their stepchildren.

Incompatible

Some participants described the incompatibility of their own personality and that of their stepparents as a large barrier in the development of the stepchild-stepparent relationship. This was especially relevant in relation to the ability to develop a level of individual respect and clout for their stepparents. When discussing factors that may prevent them from developing a closer relationship with their stepmother, two participants emphasized their differences in personality and interests:

Like, I like sports, she doesn't like sports at all. She's really into like cooking and gourmet, fancy stuff, traveling umm I like outdoorsy things. So, there's not that much of overlap as far as interests go. Umm...she likes the theater, I hate the theater (laughs) (Female, age 21 [7])

The fact that I don't really relate to her personally on any level. We can't really talk about politics, or religion or theater or art, well art kind of, but she's the filthiest word in my vocabulary that I know, a modern artist. I'm an art history major ok (laughs) (Female, age 25 [9])

Those participants who described their stepparents as incompatible usually felt like their stepparents simply did not understand them, and likewise often admitted to not being able to or even trying to understand their stepparents. As described earlier, creating space in relationships, and transitioning to a more sporadic level of contact allowed for changes in viewing relationships and this was especially true in the level of clout based on one's individual personality. One participant described a strategy used by her father that resulted in a more manageable level of contact as compared to when she lived with her stepmother:

Dad is taken to handing the phone to S when I call him (laughs). That's starting to work on the both of us I think, like ok, hey how are you, here's S (laughs). There's my tiny little voice, hey wait, oh wait.... I do end up getting to talk to him to, but it's a dirty trick of him and I hate to say that it's working. (Female, age 25 [9])

Whether it was a direct change in the level of familial clout or indirect adjustments in some aspect of authenticity or presence, clout was both built and lost over time according to the descriptions given by participants. Adjustments in the level of clout stepchildren held for their stepparent was central in changing the level of affinity stepchildren described towards their stepparent.

Changes in Affinity over Time

The development of a process of liking in stepchild-stepparent relationships is rather complex, but the interplay of presence, authenticity and clout were central in how participants perceived the sense of affinity within their relationships. The way stepchildren described their affinity for their stepparent varied along a continuum throughout the history and development of their relationships with their stepparents. At its most conflicted point stepchildren described their relationships with their stepparents as confrontational. Tolerating affinity often meant that stepchildren had afforded their stepparent familial clout and had a general respect for their stepparent but perhaps not a close personal appreciation for their own relationship with their stepparent on a dyadic level. Close relationships on the other hand meant that participants appreciated and valued their relationship with their stepparent based on the merits of that individual relationship.

Confrontational

Often in the stepfamily and human development literature stepchild-stepparent relationships, especially those with late teens or emerging adults, are constructed as confrontational and conflictual in nature, as if they have to be that way (Coleman & Ganong, 2004). This pattern however was not reflected in this study. It was common that early in the relationship stepchildren viewed their relationship with their stepparent as confrontational, and so described low levels of affinity for their stepparent. This was often due to the initial intrusiveness participants described as inherent to the beginning of steprelationships and the suspicion and lack of clout afforded to stepparents at such an early stage in the relationship. However, every participant in the study whose relationship with his or her stepparent had lasted more than 3 years had a relationship that had either transitioned to being tolerating or close. Six of the ten participants described currently having tolerating relationships with their stepparents having earlier described confrontational relationships when they were first introduced to their current stepparents. While it was less common for confrontational relationships to move to close, usually the catalyst for such change was a change in stepchildren's cognitive orientation towards their parents, a renewal in the level of clout they afforded their stepparent's role in their lives, a new recognition of their stepparent's authenticity. Even making a concerted effort to change levels of presence worked as evidenced by one participant's discussion of a turning point in her relationship:

I: When did things start to change?

P: Umm, actually my, when I was 20 or so, I decided that I was gonna contact my dad again and try really hard to work on it this time instead of being a brat and umm and it slowly since then has been getting better and better. I went to his fiftieth birthday party, and maybe he's fifty-five I don't know, but I went to his fiftieth birthday party and it was just really nice, it was really cautious, I was very scared and I didn't know what to do. But then I just started talking to them and going out to dinner with them slowly. (Female, age 25 [3])

Maintaining a confrontational relationship with a stepparent is a stressful and anxiety producing process, and as result stepchildren took steps to limit such interactions and changing the ways they

interacted with their stepparents. Sometimes this meant giving a stepparent a second chance and *building* new connections, but often it meant a transition to a stage of indifference and tolerance.

Tolerating

Rather than feeling strongly positive or negative towards a stepparent, participants who described their relationships as tolerant were characterized as mostly indifferent. One male participant stated it clearly when describing his relationship with his stepmother:

I don't view her as a parent, I, you know, I call her by her first name and I think ever since I've met her, I think I've viewed her in just an ok, well she's there and I just have to deal with that, sort of thing. (Male, age 25 [5])

Often, tolerating relationships were described as an adaptation, through which participants had tailored their behavior in order to manage the emotional climate of their households and relationships. Generally those relationships that transitioned to a tolerating level of affinity had begun as confrontational, however, one participant described a relationship that was originally characterized as close but had changed to tolerating after her stepmother broke her trust in her authenticity.

Sometimes she's very nice and very loving and you know like she'll see me and she gives me a big hug. And she just talks about all these wonderful things, have you heard this song, have you seen this movie and like nice things like that. (...) And like I said before when she was maybe or maybe not being all manipulative was kind of a different side. Like the evil side of the stepparent, I guess, Cinderella or whatever (laughs). (Female, Age 20 [1])

This participant went on to describe how their relationship had changed, how her stepmother had once been a cool, young, almost friend like companion but now:

She was just a person (laughs) I don't, I don't know, I really don't have a whole lot of interaction with her. (Female, Age 20 [1])

Their relationship had changed from where she was once her stepmother's confident and ally to now viewing her stepmother as someone who she was not sure she could trust and so chose to avoid or limit their time together. More common however, was the transition from a confrontational relationship to one

of toleration. This experience of affinity with a stepparent was most tied to a development of familial clout, and it was often the development of other relationships within the family that allowed relationships with a stepparent to move from confrontational in nature, to tolerating, this was well demonstrated by the following participant's discussion of his current relationship with his stepmother:

Umm...she's my sister's mother and I'm going to respect her for that, you now she's going to be involved in my sister's life, so she's a part of that as well, but I'm very comfortable with where it is now, we're courteous and pleasant and that's about it, I don't really want it going any further. I don't need to be open with her about things, and I honestly feel saying I think that she feels the same way. It's just easy for, easier for all of us. (Male, age 21 [6])

The tolerating level of affinity was as a holding pattern, stepchildren felt like they were able to spend time with their stepparent without engaging in the draining processes of confrontation, and were able to put aside perceived differences in at least partial recognition of their stepparent's role in their family. Clearly, stressors in the family could easily result in a transition back to a relationship characterized by confrontation, however, it can also move the relationship in a step towards becoming closer and more supportive as differences are put aside.

Close

A handful of the participants described their relationships with their stepparents as close. A high level of personal clout, authenticity and a comfortable presence characterized these relationships. This was an especially common characteristic of stepparents who had, in the eyes of participants, taken on a role similar to that of their biological parents. When describing how he valued his relationship with his stepfather one participant noted:

But umm, it's, it's like you know you want to say I love you every day but you don't cause you know you forget to say it. So I think looking, looking at it now, he kind of you know helped us get settled in America, kind of loved us, you know, our rock basically. He, he helped us a lot. So...yea, he's better than the father I could have ever dreamed of (Male, age 22 [4])

Close relationships were highly valued by participants, they often felt very well supported and grateful that they were able to create a positive relationship with their stepparents and saw the advantages to having stepparents that often filled specialized niches. While it was possible for relationships to transition from the indifferent tolerating level to close, it was the most rare for steprelationships to jump from confrontational to close. It's important to note that relationships characterized as close did not require a stepparent to take on the role of a biological parent, but rather, it meant that stepchildren had developed a framework for their relationship with their stepparent that they found supportive and beneficial. This means that affinity rather than having a set goal and end point, is a continuous process for stepchildren and steprelationships and as people age, and enter new developmental stages, affinity and relationships must be renegotiated and regularly maintained.

Other Influences

There were a number of other influences that participants discussed as playing a role in how the categories of presence, authenticity and clout developed and how they related to the development of affinity. For example, emotional maturity played a large role in whether stepchildren took steps to change the level of clout they afforded and affinity they felt towards their stepparents. In some cases, participants reflected on a point in time where they simply changed their mind and decided to give their once distant relationship with their stepparent a second chance. Emotional maturity and the ability to be empathetic with stepparents were highly intertwined with changes in both perceptions of stepparents' authenticity, and resulted in giving more clout to behaviors they had seen before as undeserving. Additionally, relationships with siblings and among other family members played a role not only in the development of familial clout, but also could have influenced other categories. Relationships with siblings and among siblings and parents was the most often addressed other influences, in one example a participant described how his brother helped reinforce his dislike for his stepmother:

We talked about it a lot and we both disliked her, and would just, umm, kind of, I guess, laugh about you know different things she would say or do. (Male, age 25 [5])

Relationships with biological fathers were also a prominent influence discussed by participants. All three of the male participants explicitly highlighted their relationships with their biological fathers as especially important to the context of their relationships with their stepmothers. It is possible that fathers may have struggled more with facilitating relationships between their new spouses and biological children as compared to women due to gender differences. Research suggests that men who remarry often feel more financial and paternal obligation towards their new family as compared to women (Coleman & Ganong, 2004). This may be partially responsible for stepchildren's confusion and difficulties in engaging with their biological fathers, and their stepmothers, once they had remarried. The result was an intertwining of relationships with biological fathers, and thoughts and feelings regarding the use or acquisition of money. This was very well expressed in one participant's discussion of the strain he felt on his relationships with both his stepmother and biological father regarding money:

If he said to me and my brother when we were younger, we were to go to a store, I'm not buying you a pack of gum, not candy, gum, because "I don't want you guys to have too much sugar", fine I can understand that. I mean I'd still probably cry about it when I was younger, but it was, "I didn't have any money", but within the same day we were going out to buy, a cabinet that cost hundreds of dollars for her to hold her crystal collection, fifty cents compared to three hundred dollars? (Male, age 21 [6])

These difficulties, specifically surrounding the use of money, were most directly addressed by the males who participated in the study and yet a conflicted relationship between daughters and their fathers who had remarried were often hinted at or directly addressed by the female participants as well. Understanding the role these influences might play in causing adjustments of presence, authenticity and clout could be central to future investigations and gaining a better awareness of affinity formation and maintenance.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Each participant touched upon the three categories of presence, authenticity and clout in describing what influenced the development of affinity within their relationships with their stepparents. The final model for affinity-development and maintenance is shown again below:

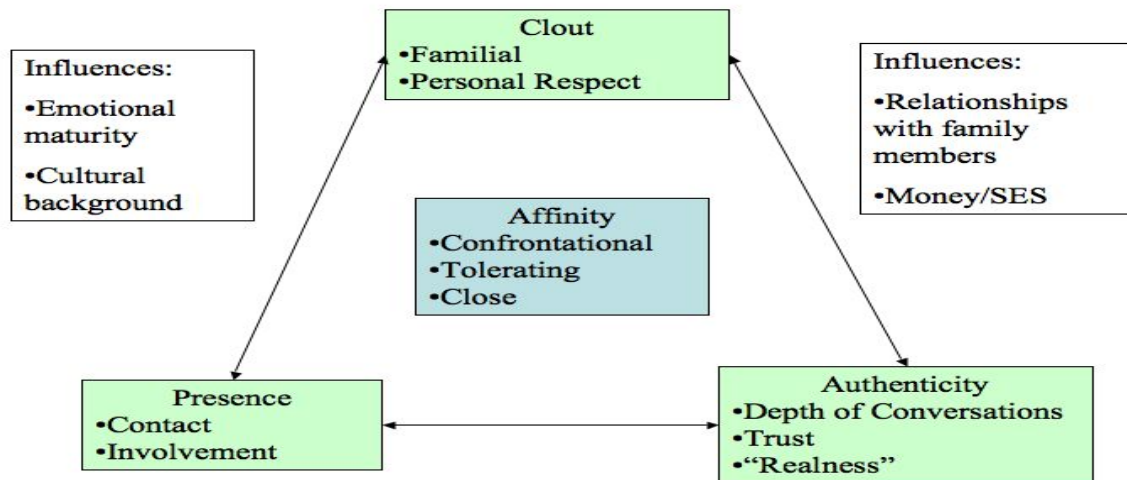


Figure 1.1 (Model for Stepchild-Stepparent Affinity Development)

Unlike other models of steprelationship development, this model allows for greater flexibility and captures the fluctuation and lack of linearity described by participants. Presence, authenticity, and clout are interwoven with one another, while still susceptible to other influences, notably those of other familial relationships and cultural background, and result in stepchildrens’ construction of their experiences and perceptions of their stepparents. This complex model should help to continue to move stepfamily research away from single-variable explanations that have been common in stepfamily literature in the past (Coleman & Ganong, 2004).

The findings of this study coincide with findings in much of the current research on stepchild-stepparent relationships. Similar to the findings found by Ganong et al. (1999) and Hetherington and Clingempeel (1992) Stepchildren who gain a stepparent at a younger age, in infancy or early childhood, have a much easier time building bonds and maintaining a sense of affinity in their relationships with

their stepparents. Additionally, stepchildren who gain a stepparent in middle childhood, faced a series of extra stresses in trying to build and maintain affinity within steprelationships, especially those of opposite gender. There is continued evidence that biological fathers, in particular, struggle with integrating and supporting the development of relationships between their new partners and biological children from first marriages. There is still a lack of institutionalization of remarriage, and this reflected itself in the wide variety of experiences stepchildren had and how they perceived their stepparents' presence or authenticity and also influenced the level of clout they afforded their stepparent. The ambiguity that continues to surround steprelationships was expressed in many of the struggles stepchildren encountered in making sense of their relationships with their stepparents.

The responsiveness of stepchildren to stepparents' attempts at creating affinity was reliant upon the efforts that had been made and the ability of stepchildren to create a framework for the role and extent to which they felt their stepparent could be authentically present in their lives. Those stepchildren who were able to create such a framework, and held individual respect for their stepparent as a person, had the closest relationships. Others, who were able to negotiate what may at times of been sporadic levels of contact, but where able to see the positive roles their stepparents played in their family, regardless of other differences or suspicions, were able to form relationships of tolerance. Finally, those who struggled to make workable relationships, and felt their stepparents were non-trusted intruders upon their family, found themselves in regular conflict. Yet, as time progresses, changes in perception and growth occur, and relationships remain fluid. Contact and involvement can be renegotiated; trust and clout can be both built and lost. Finding what works in relationships with a stepparent, is not cast in stone, but a fluid construction that in order to exist must continuously adapt and be maintained.

Limitations

Most of the participants in the study were white, female, middle class and 9 of the ten were recruited during a summer session. As such it cannot be automatically assumed that the experiences described by participants would completely transfer to those of the broader stepfamily population. It would be important for future research to include further considerations of the role of culture, as there were

indications that this may have influenced stepchildrens' perceptions or experiences of clout, presence, authenticity and affinity. Despite these limitations, saturation was reached as participants consistently discussed the same themes in the development of their relationships with their stepparents, and this study provides an important look into emerging adult stepchildrens' perceptions and experiences of their stepparents.

Implications and Further Research

Findings from this study have important implications for future research. It has been well demonstrated that the development of steprelationships cannot be the sole responsibility of stepparents, yet much of the research on stepfamilies focuses on stepparenting techniques and practices (Coleman & Ganong 2004). This study can function as a beginning structure for understanding the role of stepchildren within steprelationships and what makes them more or less receptive to different forms of relationships with their stepparents.

This study also compliments much of the current literature, and fits with and helps verify the importance of stepparents finding "niche" positions within their stepchildren's lives. However, it's important to note that the model presented in this research differs from previous research in that it gives room and explanation for shifting experiences and perceptions over time allowing for a structured but more fluid understanding of stepchild-stepparent relationships and acknowledges that relationships change and require constant maintenance. Further research may want to look at other influences and ways that family members, policy makers and other groups supporting stepfamilies might be able to adjust levels of presence, authenticity and clout in order to support or benefit strained relationships within stepfamilies.

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APPENDIX – Interview Guide

Perception of Roles

How did you first meet your future stepparent? What were your initial impressions of them?

What expectations did you have for your stepparent in regards to:

- Their role in your life
- Their role in the family
- Their relationship with you
- Their relationship with others in the family

What expectations do you think others had for your stepparent in regards to their role/responsibilities, behaviors in the family (parent, stepparent, others)?

How were your experiences similar to your expectations? How were they different?

Characteristics/Conditions that Affect Closeness/Warmth

Describe how you found out they were getting married/moving in together? How did you feel at the time?

What do you think led you to feel that way?

What do you think your stepparent did to develop your relationship with them? How did you feel about any attempts they may have made?

How do you handle disagreements with your stepparent?

What moments stand out as really positive/difficult times of being a stepchild?

Describe a typical interaction with just your stepparent? Where are you? What are you doing? How are you feeling about the interaction?

Describe an average interaction as a family? Where are you? What are you doing? How are you feeling (especially in regards to your stepparent)?

Changes to Perceptions

How have your relationships with others (friends, non-residential parent, extended family members etc...) influenced

- your relationship with your stepparent?
- how you perceive your stepparent?

Has your relationship changed since you've moved out of the house and moved to college? How so?

Describe a time that you saw a different side of your stepparent, or an event that changed how you viewed and thought about them?

Ideally, how would you like your relationship with your stepparent to be? How has this changed over time? How would you describe your relationship with your stepparent at this point in time, does it match that ideal?

How do you think your relationship with your stepparent might be in the future?

What advice would you give to someone whose parent is remarrying/about to begin cohabiting?