Relational Dialectics in Stepparent and Stepchild Relationships

by

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ABSTRACT

This study applies Relational Dialectic Theory to analyze the stepparent and stepchild relationship of one family. The data is documented in an autoethnography. Autoethnography is an approach to data collection in which the researcher's own experience is the source of data, and the experience is studied to deepen understandings of social reality. This study highlights the complexity of the stepparent-stepchild relationship, the uncertainty surrounding the stepparent role, and identifies the dialectic tensions that exist within the stepparent-stepchild relationship. The dialectics identified by this study include: *emotional-closeness-distance, past-present, autonomy connection*, and *parent-friend*. The findings related to how these dialectic tensions emerge and are managed within stepparent-stepchild relationships have implications for stepparents and spouses of stepparents and for new parents and parents in traditional family structures.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Family communication scholars, clinicians and family therapists have studied the relationship between a stepparent and a stepchild to better understand this family relationship and make recommendations on how to build a healthy relationship between a stepparent and stepchild. This previous scholarship has found the relationship between a stepparent and stepchild to be challenging, uncertain, and stressful.

As a stepparent, developing a meaningful relationship with my stepdaughter has been riddled with challenges, uncertainty and stress. At times my relationship with my stepdaughter has been satisfying, and at other times I have been uncertain what it means to be a stepparent, unsure about my relationship with my stepdaughter, and even felt hopeless. To make sense of my relationship with my stepdaughter, I explored clinical tips to improve our relationship, and documenting my experience within a journal in hoping to better understand each of our experiences. Ultimately, I decided to analyze the experience documented in this journal and to share this with others via this thesis. This study aimed to identify the dialectic tensions present within my relationship with my stepdaughter in order to better understand stepparent-stepchild relationships. Using autoethnography as a method, this study illustrates the dialectic tensions both my stepdaughter and I experienced, such as: dialectics of *emotional closeness-distance*, *past-present, present-future, autonomy-connection,* and *friend parent*. Each of these dialectic tensions will be defined in detail within the analysis.

In addition, this study explored how each of these tensions were managed, and how these tensions reflect and contribute to the challenges and uncertainty common within stepfamily relationships. The findings provide insight into the dialectic tensions

stepparents and stepchildren experience within their relationships, and can be used to help stepparents and spouses of stepparents contextualize the stepparent experience and better understand the child's experience.

In the following section, I begin with a review of literature on stepfamilies, focusing on the challenges faced by stepfamilies, acceptance stepparents receive from their stepchildren, types of stepparent-stepchild relationships and the dialectic tensions children experience in their relationships with their stepparents.

Chapter 2: Stepfamilies

Stepfamilies have become a common family structure in the United States.   The National Health Statistics Report in 2012 looked at data from 2006-2010 in order to understand divorce rates in the U.S. This study projects that 20% of first marriages will end in divorce within five years, and 48% of first marriages end in divorce within 20 years (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012). Copen et al. (2012) also discovered second marriages have an even lower success rate. Additionally, a study on children of divorced parents found that 12.3% of American children under 18 years old in two-parent households are part of a stepfamily, however this number is under-represents the number of children in stepfamilies because it does not consider children whose non-residential parent has remarried as being part of a stepfamily (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2009). Understanding stepfamily relationships have been of great interest for family communication scholars and family therapists over the years. Much of the previous research has focused on the challenges faced by stepparents (Cissna, Cox & Bochner, 1990; Ganong, Coleman & Jamison, 2011; Hart, 2009; McBride, 2008; Pasley, Dollahite, & Ihinger-Tallman, 1993; Schrodt, 2006, Shapiro & Stewart, 2012; Svare et al., 2004)

and discovering how children determine and navigate their relationships (or lack of) with their stepparents (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant & Wagner, 2004; Ganong et al., 2011). Family therapists have sought to identify strategies for stepparents and parents to help children adjust to the blended family structure (Pasley et al., 1993) and develop positive relationships between stepparents and stepchildren (Schrodt, 2006).

Challenges Faced By Stepfamilies

Scholars who study stepfamilies have classified this family system as one that is "starting with handicaps" (Cissna et al., 1990; Satir, 1972, p.173). Researchers note that out of all the relationships existing within a family, the relationship between a stepparent and stepchild is considered to be the most challenging and stressful (Schrodt, 2006). The National Stepfamily Resource Center identified seven challenges common to stepfamilies. These included: feeling caught between relationships, managing boundaries with other family members, unclear parental roles, traumatic bonding, competition for resources, different styles of conflict resolution, and building unity as a family (McBride, 2008). A review of academic research on stepfamilies revealed there is a theme of two major challenges: unclear parental roles and building unity as a family. These two themes were present across numerous studies spanning over 20 years including: Cissna et al. (1990), Coleman and Ganong (1987), Ganong et al. (2011), Hart (2004), Pasley et al. (1993), Shapiro and Stewart, (2012), and Svare et al., (2004). The prominence and recurrence of these two themes makes them dominant findings the review of literature conducted.

One of the major themes in academic literature on stepfamilies is that stepparents face a great deal of uncertainty in their new role. Many custodial fathers expect their new

wives to assume an active role in the parenting process (Svare et al., 2004) and to assume the primary caretaking responsibilities (Pasley et al., 1993) upon joining the family. This can be problematic however because, according to Ganong et al. (2011), gendered roles and expectations such as nurturing and care giving are more difficult roles to fulfill than financial roles. Nurturing and caregiving roles require an emotional engagement and even a psychological transformation in order to establish this expanded identity (Hart, 2004). This expanded identity and emotional transformation is difficult to achieve quickly.

While stepmothers in particular face challenges related to role expectations, stepparenting in general is riddled with uncertainty. Stepparents often struggle to determine what the stepparent role and responsibilities are and define their role within the family. This uncertainty affects their ability to create and maintain a satisfying relationship with their stepchild. This challenge is greater for stepmothers, who are more likely than stepfathers to struggle with not wanting to compete with the biological parent. Stepmothers are more likely than stepfathers to consider themselves parenting but not a real parent (Ganong et al., 2011).

Although the struggles with uncertainty stepmothers face is more clearly defined than those of stepfather role uncertainty, stepparents in general face relational struggles in their new family role. Stepparents (male and female) report feeling they are an outsider (Ganong et al., 2011), do not believe there is mutual love or respect, or feel inadequate (Pasley, 1985). These uncertainties can have a psychological affect on stepparents. For example, Shapiro and Stewart (2012) found that not only is stepparenting linked with increased stress levels, but stepparents are more likely to feel depressed. As will be discussed later, many of these feelings stem from the degree of acceptance that the

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stepchild has for their stepparent, as well as the lack of clarity and uncertainty around role expectations described above.

A second major theme in academic literature on stepfamilies is that the bonding process is riddled with challenges, and according to Cissna et al., (1990), whether a stepchild bonds with their new stepparent or not is vital to the stepfamily reorganization process. Research on stepfamilies implies that stepfathers bond with stepchildren more easily and quickly than stepmothers. One perspective on bonding experience differences takes an economic perspective. According to this perspective, stepfathers are more likely to be perceived as capable of raising the standard of living compared to stepmothers. This perspective also suggests that stepmothers have a negative impact on the resources devoted to the child (Hart, 2004).

Another perspective on the differences between stepmothers' and stepfathers' bonding experience is rooted in psychology. As noted above, women experience a psychological transformation upon transitioning into motherhood. Social expectations assume that this transformation should occur quickly for stepmothers as well, and that gendered parenting roles and responsibilities are to be assumed immediately (Hart, 2004). The trouble with this perspective is that these expectations are difficult to fulfill as stepmothers may not be emotionally prepared for parenting and/or lack the time required to build the type of emotional connection that parents have with their children. According to Hart (2004), stepmothers face more challenges and rejection from their stepchild than stepfathers do, and bonding with step-daughters in particular is quite challenging. Thus, the difficulty transitioning into expected gender and parenting roles, combined with the

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challenges of bonding can cause stepmothers to view their new marriage as a mistake (Hart, 2004).

Finally, it is theorized that in addition to uncertainties around balancing traditional gender role expectations, psychological transformations, and not being considered a "real mom", bonding and relationship building challenges are related to negative connotations around the term "step" that are rooted in fairy tales and popular literature (Coleman & Ganong, 1987). For example, in many fairy tales that have been adapted into popular Disney films the villain is a jealous and wicked stepmother who despises her step-daughter (ex: Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty). The influence of the association between stepmothers and being evil that has been played out in popular culture seems to affect stepmothers in newly formed stepfamilies. Svare et al. (2004) found stepmothers tend to over compensate to make up for the evil step-mom stereotype. In addition, regarding stress and relational satisfaction, stepmothers displayed higher levels of stress and experienced greater dissatisfaction in their roles than stepfathers did (Pasley et al., 1993). These factors not only make bonding more challenging, but can compound role uncertainty.

Types of Relationships

Another major area of scholarship surrounding stepfamilies focuses on the types of relationships existing between stepparents and stepchildren. Ganong et al. (2011) defined six types of stepparent-stepchild relationships exist within the stepfamily context, which will be explored in detail below.

In 2011, Ganong et al. conducted a study to look for patterns of relationship development between stepparents and stepchildren and classify the relationships into

typologies. These relational typologies were classified by patterns of behavior and interactions identified through interviews with adult stepchildren as the aim was to understand stepparent and stepchild relationships from the stepchild's perspective. The participants in this study had varying ages in which they acquired a stepparent, however over half of the participants lived with the stepparent 75%-100% of the time before they moved into their own residences. The mean age of the participants was 22.3 years old (Ganong et al., 2011). Because the participants were adults at the time of the study, it is important to note that their accounts were retrospective, which may have influenced their responses as recollections of experiences and events are problematic and influenced by many factors. The study revealed six relational typologies exist: *accepting as a parent; liking from the start; accepting with ambivalence; changing trajectories; rejecting;* and *co-existing*.

The first typology, *accepting as a parent*, describes relationships where the stepparent is accepted as an additional parent rather than a substitute parent. In these instances it is common for the stepparent to come into the child's life at an early age, sometimes before they can even remember. Within this relationship, the stepparent has always functioned as one of the parents, and often the child has regular contact with both of their biological parents. These stepchildren either avoided loyalty conflicts or have resolved them, and they actively engage in relational maintenance activities with their stepparent such as spending time together or expressing affection.

The second relationship discovered is one in which the stepchild describes their stepparent as being fun or cool, and a relationship developed based on common interests. This relationship type is called *liking from the start*. In these types of stepparent and

stepchild relationships, children are generally in middle childhood or early adolescence. This relationship is characterized by the stepparent building a relationship with the child prior to engaging in active parenting duties like discipline. Not only do stepchildren in this relationship tend like their stepparent quickly because of common interests, they also take notice of what their new stepparent does for their other parent, which further helps facilitate the relationship's maintenance and growth.

Accepting with ambivalence describes a stepparent-stepchild relationship in which the two parties eventually reach closeness, but the closeness is balanced by distance. This relationship develops at a pace determined by the stepchild. It was common for stepparents to try to build a relationship and receive little or no response from the stepchild. Eventually, and on the stepchild's terms, the stepchild would acknowledge the efforts and respond positively; however, the stepchild was still not active in relationship building or maintenance activities. Children in this type of step-relationship commonly ranged in age from school age to emerging adult, and did not live with their stepparent.

For some stepchildren, the relationship with their stepparent is described as *changing trajectories*. In these relationship types, the stepchild expressed not liking their stepparent initially. Overtime, the child eventually saw the benefit of having their stepparent in their life, and changed their feelings towards their stepparent. The study found that stepparents within this relationship tend to follow the advice of clinicians such as attempting to befriend their stepchild first, showing an interest in the child's school work, engaging in common interests and by being good spouses. In these relationships, the child commonly lived with the stepparent and was between school age and adolescence when the relationship began.

While some eventually changed their feelings towards their stepparent, others described disliking their stepparent immediately and those feelings remaining constant. This relationship is called *rejecting stepparent*. In these instances the stepchild did not respond to attempts to build bonds and used rudeness or hostility to avoid their stepparent and create distance. While Ganong et al. (2011) did not identify a pattern of age for this relational type, the findings did indicate that children in these relationships perceive their stepparent as being jealous and trying to reduce the time they spent with their parent. This suggests that the children in these relationships are school aged or adolescents, but it is not explicitly clear in the research.

The final relationship between stepparents and stepchildren is described as *co-existing*. This was common for older children and reflects a relationship in which the stepchild views their stepparent more like an acquaintance. Within this type, there is not a great deal of closeness, nor is there hostility, and children tend to be in high school or college (Ganong et al., 2011). Thus, it seems that since older children are likely spending more time with friends and less time with parents and/or because older children are preparing to move into the next stages of their lives (going to college, moving out, etc.) both the stepparent and stepchild may feel less pressure to form a bond and therefore, experience less opportunity for conflict to arise.

Although the typologies described by Ganong et al. (2011) are a useful labeling mechanism to understand the various ways stepparents and stepchildren relate, I would argue that simply labeling a relationship provides a limited understanding of the relational phenomenon. The majority of the typologies, with the exception of *changing trajectories*, are a classification that can only be used to describe a fixed point in time

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which is problematic as relationships typically do not stay fixed and static and notably change as children age. This is particularly relevant as each typology is associated with ages of the step-children and appears to restrict step-relationships into age defined options. Further, there is no discussion about whether relationships will change as the child grows. Effectively these typologies do not take into account the fact that relationships are constantly in motion and that communicative processes and relational events often result in a reshaping or redefinition of the relationship for either or both parties. Such events can propel a stepparent-stepchild relationship into a different relational typology at different relational stages. Although *changing trajectories* does take into account that relationships are in motion and can be redefined, the typology implies that movement is forward and towards a closer relationship. As noted above, *changing trajectories* describes a stepparent-stepchild relationship in which the two parties eventually reach closeness, but the closeness is balanced by distance. Ganong et al's (2011) findings fail to acknowledge that relationships can also move backwards and none of the typologies described above account for a relational shift in which liking turns into dislike or rejection.

Additionally, while the typologies can be used functionally to describe a relationship and how that relationship comes to be, only *changing trajectories* offers stepparents guidance on how to propel their relationship with their stepchildren in any direction. *Liking from the start*, suggests that stepparents have little control over their relationship with their stepchild and *liking with ambivalence* implies that the stepparent can achieve a positive relationship with their stepchild, but that the relationship might be somewhat one-sided. Age factors also suggest that step-relationships may be bound by

age restrictions. For example, unless the step-relationship was formed when the child was very young the typologies suggest it is not likely that the relationship can ever begin as *liking from the start*.

Furthermore, some of the typologies, such as *rejecting or co-existing*, offer little hope or guidance to stepparents for having a positive, accepting relationship. Stepparents can use these typologies to classify their own relationship; however, the perception that many of these typologies give (that you are accepted immediately, accepted eventually or rejected all together) combined with the suggestions about what ages each relationship type is attainable can be disheartening for a stepparent. If a stepparent classifies their relationship as rejected, they may feel that there is no hope for changing the course of the relationship. Or, if the stepparent feels the relationship is restricted by age, they might dismiss relationship building efforts all together as they are seen as being in vain.

Finally, these typologies offer no guidance to stepparents on how to cope with a relationship that is perceived as "bad", such as rejecting. While a stepparent can look to the clinical advice noted about how to change trajectories, the *rejecting* typology implies that even the largest efforts stepparents make towards improving a relationship may still be in vain if the stepchild chooses to respond to attempts to build bonds with rudeness or hostility to avoid their stepparent and maintain distance. When this is the case, Ganong et al. (2011) offers no advice to stepparents on how to cope within this relationship, despite findings from Shapiro and Stewart (2012) that stepparenting linked with increased stress levels, but stepparents are more likely to feel depressed.

As a result, while the typologies are useful for understanding different manifestations of step-relationships, they do not seem to be an exhaustive list nor do they

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provide an understanding of how relationships are defined and redefined on an ongoing

basis or due to age. The typologies also fail to address how stepparents can cope with

being outright rejected despite relationship building efforts. Relational Dialectic Theory

(RDT), which is described in detail later, allows for the stepparent–stepchild relationship

to "be viewed as a system of substantial complexity, characterized by both satisfaction

and dissatisfaction, both conflict and cooperation, both closeness and distance, and so

forth" (Baxter et al, 2004, p. 449). This approach takes into account the shifting nature of

relationships and acknowledges that relationships, good and bad, can be redefined

through communicative processes and relational events. Before turning the discussion to

RDT, in the following paragraphs additional research conducted to understand the

variables which factor into the acceptance or rejection of stepparents is explored in detail.

Acceptance or Rejection of Stepparents

Research has also aimed to understand how stepchildren come to reject or accept

their stepparent. Baxter et al., (2004), Ganong et al. (2011) and Deutsch (2013) found that

stepchildren display a great deal of variation with regard to why they accept or reject

their stepparent. Acceptance and rejection of stepparents by stepchildren is explored in

detail below.

As indicated by the various types of relationships that develop between a

stepparent and stepchild, children vary in their degree of openness with their stepparent.

While some notice and reciprocate their stepparent's relationship development efforts,

others intentionally create or maintain distance. Some children even outright rejected

their stepparents by displaying rudeness or hostile behavior (Baxter et al., 2004; Ganong

et al., 2011). While younger children are more likely to be accepting of a new blended

family than are adolescents (Deutsch, 2013), possibly because they do not perceive their stepparent as a threat against their time with their biological parent or see their stepparent as being jealous, researchers studying stepparent and stepchild relationships have sought to identify other reasons some stepchildren are more accepting of their stepparents than others (Baxter et al., 2004; Ganong et al., 2011). A few themes emerged.

First, children who are school-aged or older tend to expect the stepparent to initiate relationship building attempts, and will often exhibit distancing behaviors while they evaluate their stepparent (Ganong et al., 2011). This aligns with one of the challenges described above in which stepparents describe feeling like there is not mutual love or respect (Pasley, 1985). During this evaluation period, often a stepparent's bonding efforts are not reciprocated immediately. Researchers found that over time stepchildren will evaluate the contributions that their stepparent has in their life and determine whether they perceive their stepparent to be of benefit to them. Factors evaluated are aspects of the relationship such as whether or not their stepparent shows interest in them or their activities, what benefits the stepparent brings to their biological parent, or both. Based on these evaluations, the child will decide to either accept or reject the new stepparent (Ganong et al., 2011). Again, this can be disheartening to a stepparent when/if contributions and relationship building efforts are dismissed by the stepchild. Furthermore, this again only focuses in on a certain age group, but fails to acknowledge how younger than school aged children determine whether or not to accept their stepparent.

Acceptance or rejection also seems to vary based on the stepparent's gender. Stepfathers tend to be granted greater degrees of acceptance and develop more positive

relationships with stepchildren when the child perceives his or her stepfather to bring resources to the family (e.g. financial resources, ability to go on vacation, etc.), treats his or her mother well, and commonly do not attempt to discipline. In contrast, acceptance or rejection for stepmothers is a little more complex. Rather than evaluating a stepmother on factors such as how she treats their father or financial resources, stepchildren tend to evaluate their stepmother based on their care giving efforts, which requires an emotional and psychological transformation to occur (Ganong et al., 2011). The uncertainty and fear of being perceived as competing with the biological mother, combined with combating the evil step-mom stigma, potentially sheds some light on why stepmothers experience higher levels of stress and dissatisfaction in their roles.

Finally, sometimes acceptance is difficult for children to grant their stepparents because of loyalty conflicts. A loyalty conflict is described as feeling torn between the relationship with a stepparent and the relationship with the same sex, biological parent. The degree a loyalty conflict exists can depend on what feelings the same sex biological parent may have towards the new stepparent and/or feelings around their willingness (or lack of willingness) to share some parenting responsibilities with their ex's new spouse (Ganong et al., 2011). As a result, a stepchild will intentionally maintain distance from a stepparent to protect the same sex biological parent's feelings (Baxter et al., 2004). When this happens, it can be difficult for a child to accept a stepparent; however according to research by Ganong et al. (2011), children in blended families can effectively have close relationships with their stepparent and the same sex biological parent simultaneously.

Clinical Approaches for Building Healthy Stepfamilies

According to Schrodt (2006), the development of a positive relationship between a stepparent and a stepchild is a highly important for producing healthy stepfamilies. Clinicians assert that the stepparent and spouse (i.e. biological parent) play a pivotal role in determining how children adjust to the new family (Pasley et al., 1993). Review of clinical approaches to developing healthy stepfamilies indicated that developing a "we front", the importance of stepparents building a friendship with the child first, and how discipline is handled are all factors which influence the development of a healthy stepfamily structure.

Develop a "We Front". Many clinicians assert that the adults within a new stepfamily should focus on their communication to create a healthy stepfamily structure (Opper, 2008). The parent and stepparent must not only model healthy communication among themselves (McBride, 2008), but they must also establish solidarity of their marriage. Establishing marital unity in the child's mind helps promote a united "we" front or team approach to the child (Pasley et al., 1993). In doing so, adults can help prevent a "me versus you" mentality for children regarding their new stepparent and instead help the child to see the new stepparent as a permanent figure in the family structure and recognize the parental unity of both adults.

In addition to establishing solidarity within the marriage in the mind of the child, biological parents should be aware of their ability to shape their child's perception of the new stepparent and stepfamily. According to Ganong et al. (2011), biological parents play a major role in how a stepchild perceives and/or respects their stepparent. Therefore, it is not only important for the parent and stepparent to agree they are collectively the

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parental unit within the home, but also for the biological parent to be the one to establish the parental authority or parental creditability of their spouse (i.e. the stepparent) (Cissna et al., 1990). That said, asserting this authority is not enough. Going back to the idea that adults need to focus on their communication, it is important for the adults to establish and agree on consequences for misbehavior ahead of time together (Deutsch, 2013). Doing so prevents a breakdown in the united front in the presence of the child due to differing ideas on parenting and helps to reassert the authority and team approach that the adults are working to develop.

Build a Friendship First. Several studies on why and how children come to accept a stepparent has lead clinicians to assert that the best way to build a stepparent-stepchild relationship is to first build a friendship (Cissna et al., 1990; Fine, Coleman & Ganong, 1998; Ganong et al., 2011; Pasley et al., 1993; Schrodt, 2006; Svare et al., 2004). Recalling from the relational typologies above, the accepting, liking and eventually accepting relationships described indicated the stepparent engaged in relationship building or maintaining activities such as spending time with their stepchild, engaging in activities the stepchild likes, and showing involvement in their schooling. Given that children who are at least school-aged tend to expect their stepparent to initiate relationship building techniques first, Svare et al. (2004) asserts that stepchildren are more likely to become accepting of a stepparent when these techniques are used early. This is because in the beginning, children prefer a stepparent who acts more like a friend and offers support versus one who seeks to be authoritarian (Baxter et al., 2004). In fact, the most successful stepparent-stepchild relationships are those that involve the stepparent having a warm, friendly interaction style versus those where the stepparent

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immediately assumes a disciplinarian role (Stern, 1978). Clinicians recommend only after a child sees, and accepts, his or her stepparent as a friend or ally, can the gradual transition to establishing parental authority and/or acting more like an assistant parent be completed most effectively (Cissna et al., 1990; Pasley et al., 1993).

Although this recommendation seems valid and has support in the findings from researchers noted above, the challenge with this recommendation is that it contradicts findings about stepparent role expectations. As noted earlier, many custodial fathers expect their new wives to assume an active role in the parenting process (Svare et al., 2004) and to assume the primary caretaking responsibilities (Pasley et al., 1993) upon joining the family. Parenting and befriending are conflicting expectations as parents are often criticized for overly befriending their children. Thus, the conflict between clinician recommendations and social expectations adds to the uncertainty stepparents face as they attempt to navigate their new roles and family relationships.

Handling Discipline. As noted above, a stepchild tends to develop a closer and more positive relationship with a stepparent when the stepparent begins the relationship using a friendship approach. Thus, clinicians assert that stepparents ought to take a supportive parenting role, leaving discipline to be handled exclusively by the biological parent when possible (Borum, n.d.; Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994; Deutsch, 2013; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). This aligns with findings by Ganong et al. (2011) that suggest one reason why stepfathers bond more quickly and are more accepted by their stepchildren is because they do not take on a disciplinarian approach. Aside from basic rules, such as, no hitting, knowing how to reach each other, etc., (Borum, n.d) the stepparent should limit their role to that of monitoring behavior in the beginning (Pasley

et al., 1993). Clinicians recommend only after a stepparent and stepchild have developed a secure relationship should the stepparent consider shifting their role from monitoring behavior to handling enforcement (Deutsch, 2013). While this aligns with the recommendations about establishing a friendship first, as noted above, this recommendation also contradicts the biological parent expectations of their spouse's role adding uncertainty to stepparents.

In addition to studying the types of bonding experiences that commonly occur between stepparents and stepchildren, the challenges that occur within stepparent-stepchild bonding experiences, and suggesting approaches to improve stepparent-stepchild bonding efforts, researchers have also sought to understand how meaning is made within stepparent-stepchild relationships. These scholars have used Relational Dialectic Theory, or RDT, as a framework for understanding how meaning is created and redefined within stepparent-stepchild relationships. In the following pages, RDT is discussed in detail.

Chapter 3: Relational Dialectic Theory

Baxter's Relational Dialectic Theory (RDT) is used by communication scholars to understand how meaning is made within a variety of interpersonal relationships including: dating relationships; divorced pairs; employee relationships; marital couples; marital couples transitioning to parenthood; marital partners where one has been diagnosed with dementia; members of abusive relationships; mother-daughter relationships; older dating partner relationships; parent-child relationships; platonic friendships; retirement home relationships; romantic pairs; and stepfamily relationships (Baxter, 2009, p. 2). According to RDT parties within relationships use communication to

negotiate a variety of tensions, or contradictions, that arise naturally. Within each interpersonal relationship type, researchers have found that various, unique dialectic tensions exist indicating relational tensions are contextual. RDT has been used by previous scholars, such as Baxter et al. (2004) to study the stepfamily relational dynamic. According to Baxter et al. (2004) approaching the stepparent-stepchild relationship a RDT standpoint allows for the stepparent–stepchild relationship to "be viewed as a system of substantial complexity, characterized by both satisfaction and dissatisfaction, both conflict and cooperation, both closeness and distance, and so forth" (p. 449). RDT acknowledges the complexity of step-relationships in the wake of the challenges experienced (as discussed above) within step-relationships that scholars and clinicians have brought to light. Furthermore, RDT is an appropriate framework for addressing questions of meaning. RDT does not aim to locate variables for the sake of predicting contradictions but instead seeks to understand how the unity of opposites creates meaning within stepfamilies (Baxter et al., 2004). Since this study seeks to understand the stepparent and stepchild relationship through communicative processes rather than to classify the relationship based on typologies, and because Baxter et al. (2004) were able to apply RDT as a framework to understand meaning within step-relationships in the past, RDT is an appropriate theoretical framework for analyzing how relational meaning is defined, and redefined, in stepparent and stepchild relationships.

Foundations of RDT

According to Holquist (1981), communication is "the interpenetration of united yet competing values, orientations, perspectives or ideas" (p. 429). RDT has its roots in the teachings of Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher and teacher (Littlejohn & Foss,

2011), who believed social life is an ongoing, evolving, open dialog that is filled with

contradictory discourses (Baxter, 2004). Bakhtin believed dialogs contribute to re-

defining the relationships of those who take part through a constant effort to reintegrate

centripetal forces (forces imposing order) and centrifugal forces (forces opposing order)

(Littlejohn & Foss, 2011).

What is RDT?

Using Bakhtin's ideas, Baxter formed RDT, which relies on Bakhtin's dialogics

to understand flux and flow, as well as the idea that relationships are defined, and re-

defined, through communicative processes that manage natural, opposing forces (Baxter,

2004; Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). Thus, RDT is useful for understanding how meaning is

created within human relationships via communication (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010).

According to RDT, relationships are constantly in flux between relational poles. When

people relate, dialectic tensions (or contradictions) can arise among a variety of opposing

forces (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). It is important to note that contradictions are not

understood by dialectic theorists as disagreement. Rather, a contradiction within a

relationship is defined as the simultaneous, opposing demands or pulls existing naturally

within a relationship and within relational roles and identities. Sometimes partners will

orient themselves closer to one system of meaning and at other times they move between

systems of meaning (Baxter, 2009). The movement between relational poles, or tensions,

is identified by analyzing the communicative processes between partners (Baxter, 1998).

The unity of opposites is a central analytic concept of RDT (Baxter, 2004).

Therefore, to be a true dialectic tension, one contradiction must directly imply the

possibility or presence of the other (Rychalak, 1976). According to Baxter (1988), a

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dialectical thinker does not see contradictions within a relationship as being negative.

Instead, the presence of contradictions within a relationship is essential to change and

growth of those within the relationship. Furthermore, contradictions also can change with

time, thus negotiation of dialectic tensions can define and re-define a relationship and its

parties.

According to Baxter and Montgomery (1996), dialectic contradictions do not exist

in a vacuum but rather vary by culture and context. Thus it is the responsibility of

dialectic theorists to study contradictions within in the context of the specific relationship

of interest. Relational Dialectic Theorists must employ a *both-and* logic rather than an

either-or logic. With a *both-and* logic one end of a relational contradiction must directly

imply the other (Rychlak, 1976).   Dialectic Theorists ask us to listen for both central and

muted themes (Baxter et al, 2004) and to remember that no theme or perspective is better

or worse than its opposite (Baxter, 2006). In fact, dialectic theorists take the perspective

that relational satisfaction is not linked to an absence of contradictions within a

relationship but rather the ability for the pair to navigate dialectical tensions through

communication.

Finally, it should be noted that dialectic tension within a relationship are not

mutually exclusive and in fact can overlap with one another. For example, Baxter et al

(2004) notes that "openness could promote closeness; closedness could sustain distance

or create it." (p. 455-456). Thus, when using RDT as a framework for understanding

meaning within relationships it is also important to not only understand the meaning

created through the dialectic tension but also to understand the ways that particular

dialectics influence or relate to other dialectics.

Common Dialectic Tensions in Interpersonal Relationships

As noted above, dialectic tensions have been explored and identified across a variety of relationship types. Over the years, several common contradictions have been identified and defined. These categories are dialectics of integration, dialectics of certainty and dialectics of expression (Baxter, 2006). Baxter (1988, 1990, & 2009) identifies these dialectics as *autonomy-connection*, *openness-closedness*, and *certainty-uncertainty*. Additionally, in 2004 Baxter et al. used RDT to look at stepfamilies and identified specific dialectics present within stepparent-stepchild relationships including: *past-present, emotional closeness-distance, openness-candor,* and *parental authority-shared authority*. In order to understand how dialectic tensions emerge in interpersonal relationships, we begin with a review of the common dialectics (*autonomy-connection, openness-closedness,* and *certainty-uncertainty*), followed by a review of how RDT was applied to stepfamilies and the dialectics identified.

According to Baxter (1988, 1990, 2009), the dialectic of *autonomy-connection* is based on the idea that a relationship cannot exist without giving up some degree of individual autonomy yet recognizes that too much connection can cause a loss of individual identity. This dialectic also notes too much separation can hinder one's identity within a relationship because connections with others are essential for the forming relational identity. Thus, within relationships there is a desire to give up some sense of identity in order to form a relational identity but also the desire to retain independence. Baxter (2009) notes the prevalence of this contradiction within American culture. Because American culture places value on independence, individuals require autonomy; yet Americans also seek close relationships with others which require

interdependence. One way this contradiction manifests is in how participants within a relationship manage the amount of time spent together with how much time they allocate for separation to fulfill other obligations or relationships.

Openness-closedness is another common dialectic present in relationships. Within this dialectic, parties need both open disclosure to form intimate relationships but openness in this way creates a sense of vulnerability (Baxter, 1990). This manifests in relationships as parties have pressure to achieve transparency, yet also seek to maintain privacy. This is exemplified by how couples negotiate how much information they share with each other or with third parties, and how much information they keep private within the context of their relationship (Baxter, 2009). For example, a couple going to marriage counseling may seek to discuss their relationship with their counselor, yet also may feel threatened when certain details are disclosed that make them feel vulnerable to judgment.

A third dialectic common to interpersonal relationships is the dialectic of *certainty and uncertainty.* This dialectic has also been called *predictability-novelty*, or *past-present* (Baxter, 1990; Baxter, 2009). Within this dialectic, relational history and relational meaning are always undergoing change as people change, even slightly, constantly. This dialectic seeks the comfort of knowing what to expect, yet also notes possibility for emotional deadening to exist when there is too much repetition (Baxter, 1990; Baxter 2009). In this way, too much predictability or certainty can result feeling like the spice of a relationship is missing. Baxter (2009) notes that this dialectic is present within stepfamilies, as there is a struggle between managing the meaning of the old family and the new family, and efforts to define the new stepfamily can threaten the memory of the old family.

Dialectic Tensions in Stepparent and Stepchild Relationships

As noted above, RDT has been previously used to study the relationships present within stepfamilies. Specifically, scholars have used RDT to understand how the relationship between a stepparent and stepchild is managed and renegotiated through communication. Scholars interested in understanding the stepparent and stepchild relationship, such as Baxter at al. (2004) and Baxter (2009), have worked with stepchildren to gain understanding of how they perceive their relationship with their stepparent. In doing so several contradictions where identified, including: *past-present, emotional closeness-distance, openness-candor,* and *parental authority-shared authority* (Baxter et al., 2004; Baxter, 2009).

The dialectic of *past-present*, as it exists within the stepparent and stepchild relational context, notes stepfamilies attempt to negotiate the meaning of the old family (past) along with the meaning of the new family (present) simultaneously. This attempt to negotiate and define the meaning of the new family can be perceived as a threat to the memory of the old family, particularly for children (Baxter, 2009). Referring to the types of stepfamily relationships described earlier, it seems the existence of this tension within step-relationships manifests itself as a result of the loyalty conflicts that some children experience which prevents them from creating positive relationships with their stepparent or engaging in relationship maintenance activities.

Emotional closeness-distance refers to the contradictions present for stepchildren with regard to how they communicate with their stepparent (Baxter et al., 2004). This dialectic of integration notes closeness and distance are expressed simultaneously. Many of the stepchildren interviewed expressed intentionally maintaining distance from their

stepparent, yet simultaneously within the words they used to describe this desire, there is evidence that a close relationship is desired as well (Baxter et al., 2004). In other words, because the stepchild feels that a close relationship with their stepparent is a threat to their relationship with their biological, same sex parent, they maintain distance to maintain a perception of loyalty.

Another prominent dialectic tension in step-relationships is the dialectic of *openness-candor.* This is a dialectic of expression, which notes a desire for open communication, yet also resists open communication attempts in favor of communication lacking candor (Schrodt, 2006).This occurs because being open around someone perceived to be a stranger risks embarrassment, hurt or anger (Baxter et al., 2004). This tension also is evident with regard topic avoidance. Many stepchildren described avoiding certain topics due to uncertainty about whether information would be kept in confidence. Others described comfort with certain topics, such as similar interests, yet avoid other topics, such as talking about their same sex biological parent (Baxter et al., 2004). Based on this study's participant data (mean age was 21; mean time in stepfamily was 11.9 years) it seems likely that this dialectic would be experienced by adolescents and early adults, however, it is never made clear in the previous research.

A final dialectic tension identified through interviews with stepchildren about their relationships with their stepparent was dialectic of parental status. This dialectic is *parental authority-shared authority,* or one parent versus two parents. Within this tension, it was observed that stepchildren communicated a desire for family authority to reside in the biological parent only, yet would simultaneously express they appreciate their stepparent for the parenting-like behaviors, such as warmth or emotional support,

and feel as though they ought to grant their stepparent shared authority (Baxter et al., 2004). Within this tension, the stepchild struggles to grant authority to the stepparent, but also struggles with the decision not to grant parental authority in recognizing all the ways the stepparent fills a parenting role.

The scholarship above notes the various complexities of the stepparent and stepchild relationship. Previous researchers have sought to define the stepparent and stepchild relationship from the stepchild perspective using interviews with stepchildren (Baxter et. al, 2004; Ganong et al., 2011). Ganong et al. (2011) noted that they focused on children in stepfamilies because these children have lower levels of well being than children in nuclear families, which leads to adjustment problems. These studies classified relationships into typologies (Ganong et al., 2011) and identified dialectic contradictions within stepparent and stepchild relationships (Baxter et. al, 2004). This previous work indicates that dialectic contradictions influence the development and maintenance of stepparent and stepfamily relationships. The focus on stepchildren in the past aimed to not only achieve a better understanding of a stepchild's perception of their step-relationships but also to inform clinicians and practitioners with information to help develop recommendations which can guide positive stepfamily experiences for children.

As a stepparent, I have experienced many of the challenges identified within previous scholarship within my relationship with my stepdaughter, as well as the uncertainty and stress that these scholars and clinicians speak of. In order to start to further my understanding step-relationships, particularly my relationship with my stepdaughter, I decided to use an autoethnographic approach to data collection and conduct a thematic analysis in order to identify relational dialectics present within the

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stepparent-stepchild relationship. This approach would allow me to gain deeper insight into the communicative process occurring within the relationship my stepdaughter and I have. Additionally, this approach also offers clinicians and practitioners further insight that may have been missed in previous research. Interviews conducted by previous scholars offer a retrospective understanding of step-relationships. This retrospective angle is potentially limited in that emotional components may be muted and/or over time recollections of events may have shifted. My use of autoethnography offers more of a real-time, in the moment account of situations and provides insight into the complex emotional component, which may be muted in retrospective interviews. In the following pages, autoethnography is discussed in detail, followed by a review of thematic analysis within the method section of this study.

Chapter 4: Autoethnography

Autoethnography is "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience to understand cultural experience" (Ellis et al., 2010, p. 1). The term, autoethnography, is derived from the Greek auto (self) ethno (culture) and graphy (research process) (May, 2011). With autoethnography the researcher's own experience is the source of data, and this experience is studied in order to deepen understandings of social reality (Ellis et al., 2010, May, 2011). Many who use autoethnography as a method do so because they seek to improve and better understand relationships, reduce prejudice, encourage personal responsibility and agency, promote cultural change and to raise consciousness about a particular culture or context. Autoethnographers find this methodological approach useful for making the reader feel connected to issues and understand another's perspective (Ellis et al., 2010).

Autoethnography arose from the desire to introduce new ways of thinking and is based on the belief that value free knowledge is impossible. Instead, autoethnographers believe that subjective knowledge is valuable. The method is a newer method that has become increasingly popular in the new millennium (May, 2011) and is primarily used by anthropologists and social scientists (Ellis et al., 2010). When conducting an autoethnography, participant observers retrospectively and selectively write about experiences that are possible because of their involvement in a particular culture or by having a particular cultural identity. In addition to writing about their experience, autoethnographers analyze their writings using research literature and theoretical frameworks (Ellis et al., 2010). This moves the work from art to science.

Critiques of Autoethnography as a Method

Critics are often skeptical of the reliability, validity and generalizability of autoethnography. Because of the subjective nature of autoethnography, this method has been criticized for using biased data, being self-absorbed, and not being scientific enough. Specifically critics who see autoethnography as unscientific argue autoethnographers are not fulfilling the obligations of traditional research such as hypothesizing, analyzing and theorizing (Ellis et al., 2010). Autoethnographers have responded to critics by questioning representativeness as the golden standard for measuring validity, reliability or generalizability (May, 2011). Autoethnographers argue their work is rigorous, theoretical, and analytical yet can also be emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal experience (Ellis et al., 2010).

Just as other research methods are expected to meet the burdens of reliability, generalizability, and validity, so is autoethnography. All of these tests are based on the

readers' perceptions. To measure reliability, autoethnography is judged based on the narrator's credibility (Ellis et al., 2010). In other words, reliability for autoethnography is based on whether the narrator/researcher-participant seems like they are capable of telling the story they are telling. Validity has been measured according to two standards. First, validity is assessed by whether readers believe the story to be lifelike, believable and/or possible. If the experience told through autoethnography appears to be believable and possible, it can be deemed valid. However, because it could be possible to fictionalize an account the second way that readers assess validity is based on whether it helps them to communicate with different others or offers ways to improve their own life or the life of the author. Finally, an autoethnography is deemed generalizable if readers believe the work either speaks to them about their own experiences or the lives of those they know with similar experiences (Ellis et al., 2010). In this regard, the generalizability of an autoethnography lies in the perceived value it offers to the reader. Since generalizability is based on the reader's perception of value not all readers will find the results of an autoethnography to be meaningful. For example, a biological parent in a nuclear family may perceive the findings of this study differently, and potentially less meaningful, than another stepparent or a spouse of a stepparent. Additionally, stepparents may find this study more or less meaningful and relevant to them dependent upon their own relationship with their stepchild.

Although the meaningfulness of autoethnography will vary reader to reader the merits of this methodology outweigh the pitfalls. Given that stepparents often feel more stress and depression than biological parents (Shapiro & Stewart, 2012), the ability of autoethnography to help another stepparent feel less isolated in their experience is quite

powerful.   For this study, I hope to bring further insight into the stepfamily experience. Because autoethnography has the power to bring readers into the world of another person or help a reader better understand a perspective, autoethnography is an appropriate method for collecting data for this study. It is my hope that in using this first person approach to data collection, readers of this study will either identify with my experience or better understand their own stepfamily experience. Furthermore, it is my hope that this work helps biological parents better understand their spouse's experience, and stepparents feel a sense of shared experience. In these ways, validity, reliability and generalizability will be established.

Ethical Considerations

Because this study used autoethnography as a data collection method, as well as because the relationship involves a young child there are certain ethical issues that must be considered. The biggest of these ethical issues is the issue of confidentiality and privacy. According to Ellis et al. (2010), autoethnographers are obligated to "protect the privacy and safety of others by altering identifying characteristics such as circumstance, topics discussed, or characteristics like race, gender, name, place or appearance" (p. 31). In order to protect the rights and privacy of the child, all names will be changed. Additionally, the decision was made to conceal my identity by publishing this research under an alias. As a final measure to protect confidentiality and the rights of those mentioned within the autoethnography, it is requested that access to this study be restricted. Further, any future dissemination will frame this study as a "third-person" ethnography.

Chapter 5: Method

This study aims to achieve deeper understanding of the stepparent and stepchild relationship by analyzing the communicative processes occurring through the lens of RDT using an interpretive approach. When doing interpretive research, the "investigator hopes to gain access to the informal logic of social life" (Bochner, 1985, p. 44). Interpretive approaches to research seek to provide intelligibility versus predictability, and are useful for providing descriptions of phenomena to help extend and continue the conversation (Bochner, 1985; Rorty, 1979). Furthermore, interpretive approaches are useful for applying RDT in that they do not seek to locate variables for the sake of predicting behavior but rather to understand the meanings that phenomena or communicative processes hold (Baxter et al., 2004). Thus, RDT is useful for understanding how stepparents and stepchildren define and redefine meaning in stepfamily relationships.

For this study, I took on a dual role of being the participant and the researcher throughout the study. I fulfilled the role as participant using autoethnography as a method of data collection first, documenting 10 months of my experience and relationship with my stepdaughter in a journal. After having kept a journal for 10 months I conducted a thematic analysis of the entries compiled in her journal which recall particular experiences and interactions between my stepdaughter and me. These interactions are outlined in detail within my personal narrative, but first in the following pages my method of analysis and process used to analyze my personal narrative are outlined in detail.

Thematic Analysis

Most work using RDT has used a qualitative method of analysis in which the data is analyzed to discover themes in the form of competing discourses (Baxter, 2009). Thematic analysis is also useful for uncovering patterns that exist and classifying these patterns. This approach is useful for making meaning within a variety of data sources including interview transcripts, field notes, journals, research memos, historical or site documents, photos, drawings, maps, audio files, video files, etc. (Lapadat, 2009). Thematic analysis is used widely for data analysis because of its ability to produce insightful interpretations that are grounded within a particular context. Thematic analysis can be conducted either inductively or deductively. When done inductively, a thematic analysis involves noticing patterns and defining emergent themes using the data. When conducted deductively, existing patterns and themes are applied to the data (Lapadat, 2009). The ability to use deductive and inductive reasoning to analyze data is useful for this study because previous scholars have already identified certain dialectic tensions within stepparent and stepchild relationships; however, because of the ability to be inductive, there is flexibility to identify and define additional dialectic tensions not already discovered.

Process

As noted above, I fulfilled a dual role of researcher and participant. To fulfill the role as participant, I documented my interactions and experiences with my stepdaughter over a ten month period spanning from August 2013 to May 2014. As a participant, I was able to document experiences that were possible from my experience as a member of the stepparent culture, thus aligning my data collection with autoethnography. These

experiences I had were not lived for the sake of research nor publication, but rather to help make sense of the stepparent-stepchild relationship in hopes of reducing uncertainty and stress associated with stepparenting. These journal entries describing the interactions between my stepdaughter and I served as the sole source of data analyzed to address the research aim of this study.

In addition to documenting personal lived experiences, autoethnography requires using research literature and theory to analyze and make sense of the phenomena occurring. The journal entries collected as data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is a systematic approach used to analyze qualitative data of this sort (Lapadat, 2009), and is described in detail above. The analysis process involved first doing a full reading of the journal entries collected over the 10 month time span to understand the data on a high level. I continued my analysis by doing a re-reading of the data in order to identify patterns or themes. Data contained within the journal entries were coded and classified according to these themes using relational dialectics. This process continued until all themes are identified and coded. While I began using pre-existing dialectic tensions to code the themes identified, I was also be open to identifying new dialectic tensions that may emerge given the known complexity of the stepparent and stepchild relationship.

Chapter 6: Personal Narrative

The personal narrative that follows describes a 10 month period in my experience as a stepparent. Although the narrative has been cleaned up to fix grammatical errors and typos, the details and central themes of each entry have otherwise remained in their original form with the exception of name changes and the removal of identifying details.

As noted above, ethical considerations require that names and certain personal identifying information be removed and/or changed, thus the personal narrative below uses aliases in order to protect confidentiality. The data from this personal narrative, if used by other researchers, should take the same considerations to maintain confidentiality and it is recommended that future research that references this personal narrative do so as though it is an ethnography.

In the following pages a 10 month time frame in my relationship with my stepdaughter has been documented. When I started keeping this journal, I was approaching the end of my second year of being a stepparent. In the beginning, my goal in keeping this journal was to have a place to reflect upon, and ultimately at times vent, about the challenges and frustrations present in stepparenting. Additionally, I have used this journal to reflect upon the good times – the times when stepparenting, if even for a moment, felt easier. The narrative will serve as a frame of reference for my analysis, which will address the question of dialectic tensions present in the stepparent-stepchild relationship.

August 11, 2013

No one ever told me just how hard it was to be a stepparent. While I know being a parent is no easy role, and one that comes with enormous responsibility and sacrifice, I don't think I ever realized the magnitude of what being a stepparent would mean. I also never thought that the transition from being "Dad's Girlfriend" to "Step-Mom" would be so dramatic. I assumed everything between Sarah and I would continue to truck along as it always had. Sarah and I were buddies. I was "her Kasey" as she would refer to me to others. Before bed each night she would give me a hug and a kiss and tell me she loved

me. She never seemed to have a problem with me, which is why nearly two years after becoming her stepmom, I feel heartbroken when I look at what our relationship has evolved into over the last year or so. I don't know exactly when or why (although I have some suspicions), but it has. Sarah no longer seems to even like me, let alone love me. She will say she doesn't respect me, and seems to think she doesn't have to listen to me. I feel like she hates me. It seems that the older Sarah is getting, the more challenges are arising. These challenges are not only putting a strain on the overall mood of the house and my relationship with Sarah, but I also fear are putting a strain on my marriage. I feel like my husband and Sarah's dad, Corey, and I cannot enjoy time with each other because we are always talking about how to make our house less stressful, how to make things better with Sarah, or how to balance things for her between her mom's house and ours. Sarah and I have always been close, until now, and I want our relationship to continue to be strong. I also want our house to be less stressful, for all of us.

August 15, 2013

I have been spending time the last few days reading about stepparenting and step-relationships. I was hoping that I would find some magical path that I could set off on that would restore the relationship Sarah and I had when she was younger, and bring a sense of calm to our home.   A lot of stuff says that I should leave all the parenting to Corey and that my role as a stepparent is to be supportive of him. When I told Corey this, he said he didn't agree and that because I have been in Sarah's life for so long he doesn't want me to feel like I don't have a voice or a say. All of this is so confusing. I feel like a lot of the stuff I read assumes a new relationship is being forged or that the child is older. It doesn't seem like there is a lot of dialog about stepparents with young

stepchildren, who have been in their lives for the majority of it. I think I thought doing some research and reading would make me feel less alone, but I think now I feel more alone.

August 20, 2013

With our current custody schedule, we have Sarah every other week, and then on our off week we have one overnight. Lately, on Friday afternoon before she arrives for the week I have noticed myself feeling tense and on edge. I feel this feeling of impeding dread because I don't know if the next week is going to be pleasant or miserable. I feel like the overnight stays are a little less stressful for me, because I know if she is being distance, cold, or rude to me it is only for a few hours. Tomorrow Sarah will be over for her overnight. I am trying to remain hopeful that tomorrow may be the first day in a process of rebuilding or reestablishing a relationship.

August 21, 2013

Tonight was Sarah's overnight, the first since I began writing. I wrote last night that I was hopeful it would be a good night, and it was! We enjoyed dinner as a family (nachos, which was Sarah's pick) and had a nice conversation about school so far and her weekend. After dinner, we played a couple games of UNO, and then Sarah headed off to bed. At bed time I got a hug and an "I love you." It felt good to hear for the first time in a while. It was nice to not have any drama at home and just have a good family dinner.

August 24, 2013

Sarah came back over last night and is at our house for the week. So far the week is off to a good start and this morning was amazing! When I woke up, Sarah was already awake. Corey was still asleep so I got to have a little one-on-one time with Sarah. We lay

around on the couch and talked about school, about her teacher, and about her week at

her mom's. She told me about going to the butterfly exhibit. She really likes butterflies.

After about 30 minutes, we were both hungry, and decided to go to breakfast, just the two

of us. We got out of our pajamas and quietly snuck out of the house without waking up

Corey. I jokingly congratulated her on her first successful attempt of sneaking out.

 During breakfast we talked about art. I know how much of an artist is and I wanted to

her know that I am interested in her hobbies and passions. I was thinking that maybe in

doing so, that coldness would melt and we could start to rebuild that distance we have

been facing. It was really awesome to have some one on one time with Sarah.

When we got home, we woke up Corey. I had some homework to do so he and

Sarah took off to do some errands. When they got back, Corey said he could tell Sarah

was in a really good mood and seemed really happy today. Later that night, before Sarah

went to bed she told me she had "the best day" and asked if we can go see Planes soon.

The only hiccup of the day was when I noticed Sarah had purchased the movie

Epic from on demand. Both Corey and I know she didn't mean to and simply didn't

know what she was doing with the remote. Corey explained to her that she needs to stay

on her channels and not just press buttons. I chimed in with support for what he was

saying. Neither of us raised our voices or yelled, but for some reason Sarah got extremely

emotional and started crying. Corey asked her, "What's wrong?"

She replied "Kasey is mad at me."

 What? How was I mad at her? I barely had said anything. I was so confused, but I

gave her a hug and said I wasn't. I still don't understand why she thought I was the one

mad when Corey did 90% of the talking. Perhaps it was my silence that made her think I

was mad? Or maybe she was afraid that our good day would be forgotten? I don't know. All I know was that overall today really felt like a success. I want to try to have more one on one time with Sarah to see if that helps.

August 31, 2013

Yesterday Sarah returned to her mom's for the week. This morning Corey and I were talking about last weekend and he told me that last Sunday when Sarah and he went to breakfast, she couldn't stop talking about how much fun she had with me. He said he could really tell she enjoyed spending time with me. I already felt like her and I needed to do things together one on one more often, but this definitely confirms that we should. It is nice to know she had as much of a good time as I did.

September 4, 2013

Sarah is coming over tonight for our overnight. I am a bit bummed because I have some homework to do, which I am going to try to do while at work today if I can on my lunch. It would be nice to play some UNO or watch *So You Think You Can Dance,* and hopefully set the week up to be on the right foot when she comes over on Friday. I am trying to make myself more available for the fun stuff. I feel like with all the stress of school and work sometimes I miss out on that.

September 6, 2013

Tonight we picked up Sarah. I wasn't in the car but apparently she had a little mini meltdown. Apparently she didn't pass a math test, and when Corey asked her about it she started to yell at him, then cry. She does this to me all the time so it was sort of nice to see it returned at him. I know that sounds terrible, but it is just nice to know I am not the only one she yells at.

As he told me this story, I thought to myself that maybe I am taking things too personally when she lashes out at me. Later that night after Sarah went to bed, we were talking about her constant urge to yell at us. We both seemed to agree that when she thinks she is in trouble or is questioned at all by us, her gut reaction is to scream at us. Together, we decided that we are going to not take it personally and to calmly remind her and there is no reason to react that way. It will definitely be a test to our patience to not react to her yelling at us. Both of us really don't appreciate it and tend to want to yell back at her, but if we can remember it isn't a power struggle, I think we can help her correct this behavior.

September 8, 2013

This morning I was looking through Sarah's folder from school. She is doing so well. She is doing an amazing job in reading, and got 100% on her spelling test. I am so proud of her. She is such a smart kid.

When Sarah got back from her grandparents, I said "Hey I saw your report card". She got a little reserved. "Oh…" she said.

"Yep! You did a great job! I am really proud of you," I continued.

"Thanks!" Sarah said, with a big smile on her face.

I think she was not only proud of herself, but I think she really likes knowing when I am proud of her. Perhaps I need to tell her that more. In light of Friday's freak out with Dad, I wonder if that is one reason why she gets so defensive so quick. Perhaps she is just worried about letting us down.

September 9, 2013

Sarah got in trouble today at school so Corey had her eat dinner, do her homework, shower and go to bed. I didn't get a chance to see her but apparently she tried tell Corey that we are mean to her. I was confused on the "we" part of this. I wasn't even there. How could I be mean if I am not even there?

September 11, 2013

I went to dinner with my mom tonight and the topic of Sarah came up. My mom mentioned that a few days prior when she spent some time with Sarah, all Sarah would talk about is how her dad and I are mean. This bugs the crap out of me. It makes me feel like I am the evil stepmom in Cinderella. Even though I have really been staying out of the disciplining part of parenting and trying to focus on supporting Corey and building a fun and positive relationship (which is what I read I should be doing), I am apparently still a jerk in her eyes. Corey says he doesn't care. He equates this to the fact that Sarah doesn't have many rules at her moms and that the parenting structures are so different. Corey continued by saying, "If Sarah thinks I'm mean, oh well."

I don't know why but it just seems to bug me and I can't have his same approach. I do everything I can do make this kid happy, but she still thinks of me as this outside evil force that is ruining her life. Not only that, she runs around telling it to everyone. I don't get it.

I am sick and tired of being the "bad guy" in her eyes when all I ever do is try. I would hardly describe myself as mean but more as a parent, even more lenient than her Dad at some things. While we both expect her to do her chores (feed the dog, clean her bathroom once a week and make her bed), from time to time, I'll give her a free pass on

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not doing her chores just to be nice and avoid unnecessary conflict. I take her to breakfast, just the two of us. I give her dad and Sarah time. We have family time. I ask her about her life, her likes, and her dislikes. I encourage her to tell us what she is passionate about; what she wants to do for an after school activity. I encourage her when she is doing well at school, and I remind her that she is smart and can do anything she sets her mind to. I just don't understand it. It makes me want to disassociate from the family structure….it makes me not want to be part of her life. It really just hurts and it is just pathetic that a 6 year old can have such a tug on my emotions. I feel like no matter what I will never be good enough for this kid….ever… It sucks… it is defeating, it is discouraging.

September 13, 2013

Today I went with Corey to drop Sarah off at school. I realized I really don't see Sarah much in the morning because Corey goes into work earlier than I do. I have to say she made my day. When she got out of the car, without prompting from Corey, she climbed up in the front seat, gave me a hug and told me she loved me. It has been weeks since she has done that. Part of me wants to feel like this is a step forward, but after the other day, part of me thinks it is just a fluke.

September 22, 2013

This afternoon has been far from good one. Corey made feel guilty because I have to do homework and cannot pick Sarah up from school tomorrow. He was upset because he has homework to do too. I hate feeling guilty. Sometimes I feel like he expects me to take on the role of being a mom 100%, not realizing that I haven't had kids of my own because I have other things that I need to do that takes priority to me. On top of that

Sarah wasn't being very kind towards me. She kept giving me dirty looks for no reason. I ended up snapping on her finally at dinner.

"Sarah I haven't yelled at you or been mean to you at all. I don't appreciate you giving me dirty looks because you don't like what I have to say. You tell everyone I am so mean to you, even though I am not. It hurts my feelings. If you want me to start being mean then I am happy to do so because you are being mean to me!"

On that note I excused myself from the dinner table and went upstairs to read. While sitting upstairs, I felt bad about my outburst but I also felt like a weight had been lifted. I think all of the frustration of her telling everyone I am so mean to her just built up and I couldn't take it anymore. Was it fair to lash out at her? Probably not. Could I have handled that better? Absolutely. But, it felt good to not be muted.

A while later Sarah came up stairs to apologize to me. She asked if she could give me a hug.

"Does a hug make everything better?" I asked.

"I don't know," said Sarah.

"Well it is a start I guess, but I am still upset that you keep being rude to me," I said as I hugged her.

September 24, 2013

Corey and Sarah and he had a difficult start to the day. Apparently, he had told her to brush her hair, to which she said she already did. When he told her it didn't look like she had and to go back upstairs and do it again, Sarah got mad and started yelling at him.

"At my mom's house she helps me blow dry it and no one helps me at your house," she said.

"Have you ever asked?" Corey said.

"No."

"Well, if you need help or need something you need to ask because we don't read minds Sarah. You know Kasey will help you if you just ask." he said.

Later that night I talked to Sarah about it. I explained to her that she doesn't act like she likes me or wants me around, so therefore I do my best to try to stay out of her way most of the time. I told her that I don't feel like she wants anything to do with me and has never asked so I didn't know she needed help or even wanted a blow dryer. I ended the conversation telling her I am happy to help her, if she would just ask.

October 2, 2013

Last night Sarah came over for her overnight. We had a really good night. We also talked about Sarah's birthday, which is about a month away. I asked her what she wants to do for her party. She wasn't sure so I gave her some suggestions (bowling, movies, pizza party, sleep over, etc). She said she would like to have a sleep over. Oh boy, what did I get us into! She wanted eight friends over, but that is too many so I suggested four. We settled on five. She is super excited.

There was one little issue that came about. Sarah has been drawing on herself a lot lately. I know this is a typical kid thing. Heck, I got in trouble for it CONSTANTLY as a kid; but it isn't the drawing that is a problem rather it is the where she is drawing. She is drawing on her upper thigh, which really seems inappropriate to me. I noticed it and told Sarah that I know her Dad doesn't want to see that so she should feel lucky he didn't, but

that I don't want to either. She said her mom lets her draw on her thighs. I told her that is fine but she needs to have it gone before she comes over or she will be in trouble.

Later Corey thanked me for caring and for handling the situation without him. I explained to him that I just don't feel that is an appropriate place for her to be drawing. It is teaching the wrong message and sends the wrong message. He agreed 100%. It felt nice to feel like I did something right as a parent… actually a few rights today!

October 3, 2013

I recently read an article about parenting in blended families. It recommended the stepparent and parent take a "we front" approach. I know Corey wasn't a fan of the first approach I had read about, which says a step parent should not have any parenting responsibilities/duties. I talked to Corey about this approach, and he had agreed it would be good to start trying to communicate as a "we front" and he liked this strategy better. So, today we started trying this. Anytime Corey would talk to Sarah, he was careful to say things like "we told you" and "we decided". In particular, with regard to Sarah's birthday sleepover, Sarah had invited more friends than we told her she could have. Corey and I had talked about what to do and decided that since she didn't follow what we had agreed on as a family, she would not be having a sleepover. That night we sat down and talked to her. Corey started the conversation.

"We have decided that since you invited too many people, you cannot have a sleep over," he said as Sarah became super upset.

"There just isn't enough room here for that many kids Sarah. That is why we gave you a specific number, which you helped us decide on," I said.

Sarah began to sob, and told us she didn't understand why she wasn't allowed to have that many people over. I started to wonder if she was trying to pour on the tears to try to change it. It seemed as though she thought if she were to cry, we would feel bad and change her mind.

"We are not mad at you Sarah, but you didn't follow the rules we agreed on as a family and we are disappointed in you for not listening to us," Corey said.

When we talked later, Corey and I agreed that it seemed like since it was Sarah and I who had initially had the conversation about the sleepover, she thought "eh, Kasey said 5 people but I don't have to listen to her so I'll just invite however many I want and Dad will let me." If that is the case, hopefully Sarah will see that both her dad and I share authority in the house. We also talked about our first attempt at a "we front". Even though she didn't seem to totally grasp the idea that both Corey and I make parenting decisions, we decided this was an approach worthy of continuing to apply. Hopefully (in time) this we communication attempt will help her realize that her dad and I are a collective unit and that if I say something or dad says something, either of us are speaking for both of us.

I do wish she wouldn't have blown the sleep over idea. I was really excited about it. I thought it would have been a fun opportunity to show her that I can do something fun for her. I was excited to take on the responsibilities of planning activities (such as movies, painting nails, crafts) and making food (mini pizzas for dinner and pancakes for breakfast). After doing some research and trying to find an affordable option, I think we are going to ask her if she wants to do Peter Piper Pizza or go to the park for her party instead.

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October 7, 2013

Yesterday Corey, Sarah and I were all being goofy together. Out of nowhere Sarah says, "Kasey you are funny."

"Thank you," I said.

Jokingly Corey was asked, "Oh, so I am not funny?"

"No Kasey is funnier," said Sarah, "but I love you more."

I obviously expect her to love her dad more, but it is just like what is the point of saying something like that. Something I recently read jumped into my head. The article noted that oftentimes, young kids are not capable of recognizing it is okay to have love for someone outside of their immediate parents. I don't expect her to love me, but with everything I have been focusing on with our relationship, it just hurt that she would say something that I believe she knows is hurtful. I made the decision to let this roll of my back. "She didn't mean anything by it," I told myself.

From there the day just continued to spiral out of control, and we went from having a nice family day to all of a sudden feeling like I don't belong. Sarah started being rude to me. She completely refused to listen to anything I would say, and at one point just blatantly walked away while I was in the middle of talking to her. It was all really starting to add up and weigh on me emotionally. On top of that I felt like Corey wasn't having my back or being there for me. He just was oblivious to everything.

I ended up calling my mom because I needed someone to vent to. She told me that I need to stand up for myself, even if Corey won't. She said it is important that I don't let Sarah see me as weak. Hmm… I hadn't ever thought that maybe Sarah saw me as weak. Maybe all my efforts to try to go back to being her friend after all these years in a

parental role (2 years living together, 2 years married), was weakening my parental authority. An interesting piece of food for thought from my mom…

Later in the evening, Sarah started at me again. I was very confused on how this day transformed from a fun morning into this hostile warlike environment.

"Do you think I am an evil stepmom or something," I asked.

Sarah replied, "Yes".

When she went to bed, I finally decided to talk to Corey about my day. I explained to him how hurt I was feeling. I told him that sometimes I don't want to keep trying so hard because it feels like it is in vain. I know many people who don't have the strongest relationship with their stepchildren, and children who don't have strong relationships with their stepparents. Why am I so worried about it? As Corey and I talked, I reminded him that while I do I love him, sometimes I think if I could go back in time I would tell myself that being with a man with a kid is something that I should really think long and hard about. While it seems like it will be fine as long as you love each other, it really sucks sometimes. I explained to him for the first time that the stress of stepparenting and trying to figure out the relationship with Sarah is having a negative impact on my relationship with him.

I also told him I was going to take some of my mom's advice. My mom had told me that when Sarah is being mean to me or disrespecting me, I need to tell her that she needs to go upstairs or in another room until she can figure out how to be nice. My mom told me that rather than me hiding out or removing myself, I should continue what I am doing because this is my house too. I told Corey about this advice, and that it is bullshit that I am constantly trying to fight the evil stepmom stereotype but no matter what I do I

am always the bad guy. I told him that I don't care anymore if she thinks I am an evil stepmom.

This morning Sarah woke up and told Corey she heard us talking last night. She said it made her sad because she doesn't want me to tell her to go away. She told Corey she cried herself to sleep. Perhaps I am a jerk, but I don't really care that she heard. I told Corey he needs to talk to her to find out what she heard, but I don't feel like anything I said to him was something that would be terrible for her to hear. Perhaps her being a fly on the wall will help her realize how much she is hurting me. Perhaps it won't. Regardless, I have made the decision that I am not going to let her continue to hurt me. I deserve to be treated with kindness. I am going to start standing up for myself.

Later tonight, Corey told me that he had called one of his best friends to talk about everything. He told her about my feelings and about Sarah overhearing and she had my back. She told him that he needs to stop worrying about Sarah thinking he loves me more because she knows that isn't true, and he needs to put his foot down and say to her "This is my wife. You are not going to treat her that way." It is nice to feel like I finally have people on my side… for once.

With everything going on the last couple days, I definitely cannot wait until Friday when Sarah goes back to her mom's house. I need a break from all of this.

October 8, 2013

So even after my rant yesterday about taking a step back and feeling defeated, today turned out to be a great day. Sarah came downstairs with soaking wet hair after her shower. I remembered what she had said about wanting her hair blow dried, but she still

hadn't asked for her. To try to ease some of the tension in the house, I asked her if she wanted to blow dry her hair. She got all excited and we went upstairs to dry it.

Later on, she was upstairs watching TV in her playroom. I went upstairs to get something (can't remember what exactly) and as I walked past, Sarah said, "Kasey…. I love you."

It was so random, and it has been a while since I have heard that. "I love you too Sarah," I said. These two moments (bonding while I helped her with her hair and her saying she loves me) made me feel a complete emotional 180 from the drama filled weekend…

October 10, 2013

I have class tonight so I don't get to see Sarah, but I did get to talk with her on the phone. I ended up stopping at McDonalds on my way to class and got a Happy Meal. The Happy Meal came with the toy, which was a Monster High Frankie Stein trick or treating bucket. When I talked to her, I told her about the bucket and let her know that even though I won't be home until after she is in bed, I will leave it in her room for her. She was super excited and said thank you. When I went to say bye at the end of our call, I got another I love you. It is strange the way we went from a really bad weekend, to a really great week. I am sort of sad she will be going back to her mom's house. I don't want this positivity between us to end.

October 28, 2013

We have been working on using the "we front" approach to communication. Corey and I have been really conscious about using 'we' and 'us' instead of 'I' when we are communicating with Sarah. This approach slowly seems to be working. Sarah was a

little resistant at first, but she seems to be understanding that Corey and I make decisions on things (rewards and punishments) together. Since we have been taking a "we front" approach, Sarah seems to be behaving well. All in all, the mood in our house has been lighter, less stressful and more fun. It is great when we are all on the same page. Everyone is happier and that momentum seems to keep things going on track. It keeps Sarah happy, keeps Corey less stressed, and makes me feel like we are doing something right. When things are going well I am reminded why everything I am working on is so important.

November 4, 2013

On Halloween night, I decided to skip school so I could go trick or treating. I feel like I miss out on so many experiences with my family, especially ones with Sarah because of school. Everything I have been reading about healthy families says that time together like that is so important. So, I missed school and went with.

Sarah was pretty oblivious to the fact that I was there (and even to Corey being there), but it was still nice to be there. I didn't let it get to me. I have come to expect that whenever there is an event where Sarah is with both of her parents and me simultaneously, she tends to gravitate towards her mom. Over the years, this is something I have had to learn to not take personally. Sarah's mom was a little on edge that night. At one point Sarah was getting screamed at by her mom, for nothing. Corey went to step in and support Sarah's mom in her yelling, but I quietly stopped him. I didn't believe that Sarah did anything that warranted being yelled at. I whispered to him to stay out of it, and I reminded him how she always thinks we are the bad guys and that it is good for her to see we aren't always the bad guys.

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Saturday was her birthday party at Peter Piper Pizza. She had a blast with all her friends from school. I tried really hard to interact with the other moms, but I don't think they took me seriously. They all already know Sarah's mom, and who knows what she has said about me. Even one of my other friends mentioned something about it, so I know it wasn't me just being paranoid. I think that is so lame. Half of the time, I am Sarah's female parental figure. I feel like these women should be more respectful, or even just cordial, but whatever. I try to not let it get the better of me, but it is frustrating. How can I expect Sarah to ever see me as a parental figure when grown adults can't even do that?

After the party, we came back to the house and her friend came over. The two girls were playing and being silly. They kept coming up to me and wanting me to hang out with them. I feel like Sarah's friend was leading the charge because she adores me, but it was nice to see Sarah act like she actually wants me around. We did a bunch of girly stuff (painted nails, did facial mud masks, etc.). I told Corey I feel like stepmom of the year, and he said it was so nice to see us bonding so well. He told me that he thinks I am a great stepmom. Getting this sort of reinforcement from both Corey and Sarah at the same time was wonderful.

November 7, 2013

Today is Sarah's 7th Birthday! So crazy! Sarah requested that I make Stuffed Shells, her favorite, for dinner. Because she has been really into the idea of doing her hair, specifically blow drying it, I got her a little travel size hair dryer for her birthday. My hair dryer is bigger and heavier and she has such a challenge with it. I figured this

would be a great gift. She was really excited. I got another I love you at the end of the night, and actually am starting to feel like she actually means it.

November 12, 2013

I actually got to see Sarah tonight. Normally when I get home from class, she is already in bed. When I walked in the door I was surprised she was still awake and she seemed really excited to see me. She ran over and gave me a hug. She had to go to bed shortly afterwards but it was still really nice to see her.

November 18, 2013

Sarah has not been very kind to me the last few days. She has been being disrespectful, not listening and giving me major attitude. It is sort of out of nowhere. To help reinforce our talks about respect over the past few weeks, we have been doing this check mark system where when she is respectful and well behaved, she gets a check mark. When she gets to 10 she gets a prize (a toy, going to the movies, ice cream etc). She is so close to the 10, so I had to remind her that if she keeps being disrespectful, we will not give her a check mark for today. She instantly looked at Corey for affirmation, to which he nodded and said "I agree, what Kasey says goes to."

December 3, 2013

Yesterday we gave Sarah money for Christmas shopping at school. When we were enjoying dinner I asked her how shopping was. She replied "I didn't get anything for you." I thought to myself that that was a little unnecessary. Last year she didn't get anything for Corey either. It makes me mad that we give her money to do her shopping, and she doesn't get anything for us, or our family. She only got stuff for her mom and her maternal grandmother. It makes me feel like she doesn't care about us that much. As an

adult, I know Christmas isn't about the gift, but rather about the thought. It hurts that we aren't even a thought to her.

January 12, 2014

I haven't written in a while. The holidays were super hectic, but things are settling in back to normal. Sarah is back in school and I am about to return to school for my final semester of classes. Corey finished his Masters program so hopefully we will be able to achieve even more structure at home now that both of us aren't going to be distracted by school. I think that will be good for the household.

We received Sarah's report card over the break. Academically it was good, but behaviorally there is some improvement to be made. The report card said she is talking too much in school and being a distraction to others. We reminded her that all those times she got on blue last semester caused that. We talked to her about how if she gets on blue anymore, she will lose TV for the week rather than for the day. Corey tried to say that if she is on blue again, we won't do anything fun the rest of the semester, but I stepped in quickly and said that is not even a feasible punishment. Everything I read says we need to be a "we", especially in front of her, so I hated having to overstep him, but I also know that we have to have a punishment that we can realistically enforce.

Sarah's attitude recently has been okay. I find myself feeling a lot of resentment lately about the fact that I am not her real mom, which she loves to remind me of. A few weeks ago we watched the movie *Oz*. After the movie, I was talking to her and said we should watch the *Wizard of Oz.* Her reply was something along the lines of "Yeah, I will watch it with my mom."

I got upset by this. "Whatever Sarah... I wanted to watch it with you and you always do that. If you don't want to spend time together, we don't have to," I said.

It was frustrating because I was suggesting it as something we can do together, and she doesn't seem to want to do it with me. I try not to let these things bug me but they do.

I am also feeling a good deal of frustration around my in laws. They constantly overstep Corey and me, which I feel makes it harder for us to accomplish what we are trying to achieve in our home. They constantly act as though they are Sarah's parents. For example, they gave her soda with caffeine, which something we never allow. We are more than okay with her having the occasional Sprite or Fresca, but Dr. Pepper is definitely not something we let Sarah have. When I said something about it, my mother in law just acts like my opinion doesn't matter. She seemed to brush me under the rug. I wanted to say "last I checked you weren't her parent", but then again, does anyone see me as her parent?

January 26, 2014

Sarah is back at our house and overall it has been a good weekend. She stayed at her grandparents on Friday night and then I was absorbed with homework most of Saturday. Saturday evening we headed to a birthday party for one of her friends. Prior to the birthday party, Corey was running some errands so it was just the two of us. I asked her not to do something and her response was "my dad said I could". I replied back telling her that he isn't here right now and I had to remind her that I am a parent too, and therefore if I say something she needs to listen to me, especially when he isn't around.

On Sunday, while I was making dinner she made me a cute bracelet. After dinner, we had family game night. We were playing UNO Attack. It took our normal family game of UNO to a whole new level. There were lots of laughs and it was a great time, but when bed time rolled around, I was forgotten about… no goodnight… no hug… nothing…

January 31, 2014

Last night was one of the best days I have had with Sarah in a long time. Between school on Monday, Sarah being at her mom's on Tuesday, and my homework, yesterday was really the first day since Sunday that I saw Sarah. I got home from work and got started on dinner right away. Sarah had gotten a yo-yo at school and was all excited to show me the tricks she learned, like 'walking the dog'. She and I were being goofy. I was picking on her saying that if she didn't stay out of the kitchen while I was cooking, she would have to make dinner. She would pretend to throw toddler style temper tantrums (but all in good fun), then get up and try to play with me in the kitchen. As I write this, it almost reads as though she was being defiant, but it was this little game we were playing. This went on for about 10 minutes. I pulled out my camera on my phone to take a video. I ended up taking one of the funniest videos ever. "I am going to put it on YouTube and show your boyfriend some day!" I joked.

When dinner was ready, we ate and talked about the talent show at school. Sarah didn't try out, and I was trying to convince her she should because she is super talented. She doesn't seem to think so. I wish she did. I think Corey and I need to put her in a hobby. I think it will give her a lot of confidence. Also, with how much Corey and I are both into sports and activities, I think it would help us to bond with her a bit more. She

said she wants to do ballet. That would be ideal from my standpoint, seeing as I did gymnastics and dance growing up. I think it would help us grow closer, but at the end of the day I am not going to try to push her any direction.

This morning I drove her to school and joked with her that I was going to first grade and she is going to go to my work. It was so nice to start the morning off with laughter.

I wish every day could be like the last 12 hours were.

February 4, 2014

Sarah has been having girl drama at school. Basically, Sarah and another girl keep bickering and tattling on each other. Corey and I have been trying to get her issues with her one friend to stop by talking to her about playing with her other friends. Today she got in trouble for pinching this girl when they were standing in line. Sarah claimed that she said she never did pinch the girl and that the girl just made it up.

I really wanted to talk to Sarah about what is really going on, and have an open and honest conversation. I felt like there might be more to the situation and we shouldn't be so quick to assume Sarah actually did pinch her only because of the recent drama they have been having. When Sarah came downstairs, I asked her if we can have girl talk. I asked her about her friend and what was going on. At first she was timid, like normal. She carefully picked her words thinking she was going to get in trouble. My goal was to create an open environment, where she could feel honest. I told her about a friend I had, who wasn't being nice to me and I had stopped being friends with. This opened her up, and wow, once she opened up it was like the flood gates opened. She started to vent

about her friend and the issues they are having. She said she felt like her friend was mean to her and it made her sad because she tries to be nice to everyone.

"Well, maybe you should try putting your energy into your other friends that are nice to you. You are a good person and a good friend and you don't deserve that," I replied.

When we finished talking, I told her that she can always talk to me about anything and we can have girl talk whenever she wants. After the conversation, Sarah was so cute. She told her Dad we had girl talk and that means no boys allowed. Corey told me when he put her to bed she told him that she can tell me anything. He said she was really happy and excited about that.

It made me feel like I did something right and took a step towards improving our relationship by making her feel comfortable, and able to be honest. I feel like she really saw, and maybe now believes, how much I care about her.

February 7, 2014

I took Sarah to the park today. When we were there, another little girl asked her if I was her mom. Sarah got a very disgusted and defensive tone and said "NO!"

It stung a little. When people ask if she is my daughter, I always either just say yes, or say that she is my stepdaughter. I wish she could have just said "No that is my stepmom." The disgusted tone made me feel like I was knocked down a peg. I don't expect to ever be her mom, but I wish she could realize that I am not going anywhere after five years and that saying that hurts. I know she is young, but it is something her Dad has talked to her about a bunch. Sucks…

February 14, 2014

Valentine's Day! This year I wanted to do something fun, so we each picked Valentines. I was Corey's, Corey's was Sarah's and Sarah was my Valentine. Before dropping her off at school, we decided to have Valentine's Day breakfast. I got Sarah some cute little socks and a small box of chocolates. We headed to IHOP for breakfast before work and school. Everything was going well, but then Sarah started being rude to me. She was giving me attitude, yelling at me and giving me dirty looks. Corey defended me and told her to knock it off. By the time we left I was happy to be going to work and getting away from this situation. It really bothered me that I tried to do something fun and nice for us so we could all have a good family memory and she just was mean the entire time. It really put a sour taste in my mouth about the entire morning. Sometimes I really wish that I didn't have to deal with this nonsense. I hate feeling like no matter what I do, it is never good enough.

February 18, 2014

What a pain today was. I am feeling exceptionally frustrated. Sometimes I really wonder why I am even trying so hard to improve my relationship with Sarah. I feel like my efforts are in vain.

Sarah got in trouble on Friday at school. When we were talking to her at dinner last night about it we asked her why. She replied that "She just doesn't care because her mom doesn't do anything". Naturally, Corey and I were pretty shocked by this answer. She knows at our house, we care so it was stunning to hear this answer, but in some ways it wasn't surprising. Sarah's attitude has certainly been pretty terrible lately.

This morning I woke up and made breakfast for everyone before work. When I went to head upstairs to get ready for work knowing Corey and Sarah would be leaving soon, I told Sarah to have a good day at school and be good. I reminded her to not get on blue, because even though she doesn't care, we do.

Corey must not have been paying attention but when I left the house to head to work I called him. He instantly asked me what I said to Sarah. He had a very accusatory tone, like I had done something wrong. I told him word for word what I said and asked why. He said that Sarah told him that I am mean and that I hate her. My heart sank for second, then rose back up and my heart rate escalated. How am I the bad guy? And most importantly, why does she think I hate her? I have been trying so hard to improve our relationship and I thought I was making progress. We have had girl time, girl talk, we have goofed around… I didn't understand.

This lack of understanding really turned into anger quickly. I got off the phone with Corey so angry and defeated. I feel like no matter what I do Sarah and I will always be at odds. Sometimes I think that everything I am trying to do to improve the relationship is just a waste of time. I feel really hopeless that it will never improve. I can't help but wonder if maybe I should be a less active stepparent. Perhaps I should only engage in conversation with Sarah when Corey is present and only on positive topics. Perhaps I should let all parenting be just his responsibility exclusively. It definitely seems it would be easier but also seems ridiculous because this is my house too. Plus, I know Corey doesn't want me to be a disengaged parent. He wants me to show up, to care, and as he says "if Sarah doesn't like it tough." I feel torn between wanting to go into self-preservation mode, and wanting to continue to try and be the stepmom Corey wants me to

be. All I know is that right now I feel like there is no way to ever overcome being perceived by Sarah as the evil step mom.

February 23, 2014

Today was sort of cool. My mom came over and we planted a garden in our back yard. Corey tried to send Sarah inside/upstairs to watch TV while we finished but I invited her to come out and garden with us. She had a lot of fun, especially for a kid who doesn't like dirt. It was nice to spend some time with her and my mom. I know my mom has wanted to bond with Sarah too. Sarah kept on saying how much fun she was having and how she thought it was cool we were going to grow our own food. I wonder if this will turn into something her and I could bond over as the garden starts to grow.

March 16, 2014

I haven't written in almost a month which is crazy! With Sarah's spring break and the custody schedule, Sarah wasn't at our house for two weeks. On Friday, I went out with some friends and when I got home Sarah was so excited to see me. Unfortunately, she had to go to bed shortly after but she gave me a huge hug, and told me she loved me. I really felt like she has missed me as much as she missed her dad and her puppy.

The next morning, I woke up and made breakfast for the family. While I was cooking Sarah asked if we can have a girls' day soon. I told her of course! I couldn't help but feel really loved, appreciated and missed. It felt as though time away actually enhanced the relationship. I joked with her that she must have missed me a lot because she usually isn't so happy to see me. That night, we went to a family BBQ with Corey's family. Typically at these types of events when her grandparents or other family members are around, she doesn't like to listen to me. However, this time she was so well behaved

and even would come give me hugs while we were there. When we got home, she asked me if we could paint our nails green for St. Patrick's Day, which we did together.

The next afternoon, we went to a friend's house. Sarah continued to be really kind toward me, although she started to have issues with listening. I almost don't think that she wasn't listening intentionally, but more so because she was just distracted. Shortly after, we had to bring her back to her mom's house. I told her to be sure she had everything she needed to bring to her mom's, to which she responded "yea but I don't go back yet."

When I told her that she was going back now, she had a very disappointed look on her face, but I told her we would be doing dinner on Tuesday and then we will have a girls' day this weekend. She seemed a bit happier about that. I haven't seen Sarah look disappointed to leave us in quite a while. I really think the time away because of the Spring Break schedule really made Sarah want to be with us.

March 21, 2014

We picked Sarah up for our normal week. The visitation schedule is back on track, which I was happy about. I could tell Sarah really missed us both.

We had plans to go to San Tan Flat. It is a local restaurant and at each table outside you have your own fire pit. I had the idea to bring stuff to make s'mores. Corey and Sarah picked up the stuff on their way home. While they were at the store, I got a phone call. It was Sarah calling me to tell me I am awesome for thinking of making s'mores. She and I talked on the phone for about 10 minutes, and then I told her I would see her when I got home. That was by far the longest her and I have ever talked on the phone.

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At dinner, Sarah kept on telling me and her friend how excited she was to have a girls' day, which we are having tomorrow. She said, "I can't wait to have a girls' day Kasey! We haven't had one in a while."

I am really happy that Sarah wanted to have a girls' day and that she is so excited about it. Other than going shopping I am not really sure what her and I are going to do but it should be fun. My only hope is that after we have our girls' day, she doesn't start treating me badly again. Typically after her and I do something fun, she gets an attitude. She does this with Corey too. I know it is a normal kid thing to be on best behavior until you get what you want, but I have a hard time not taking it personally.

March 24, 2014

I was too angry to write on Saturday or Sunday. After girl's day, we went to our friend's house for an afternoon at the park and dinner. It was our family, and then two other families who have kids Sarah's age. My day with Sarah had been great so far, however as soon as Sarah's friends came over, she started to treat me like I was the evil stepmom again. Sarah has had a number of cavities and so I have been trying to get her to drink things other than soda and juice; trying to keep her away from all the excess sugar. Her friend had a big soda from Circle K. Sarah went up to her dad and said "Can you go get me a soda from Circle K".

"No Sarah. You don't need any soda," he said.

A few minutes later she walked up to one of our friends (another child's parent) and asked again for soda. This time, I heard her ask and said "Sarah you don't need any soda," oblivious to the fact that her Dad had already told her no just a few minutes before. "You can have water or milk," I continued.

She started to give me some attitude, rolling her eyes at me and giving me dirty looks across the table. I told her to knock it off.

As the kids all ate diner, another parent announced that if they eat all their dinner, then they can each have a Popsicle. Sarah responded to this by saying, "Kasey won't let me have any!"

I got really mad. First off, why does she think I won't let her have any? Second, what is with her negative attitude towards me after I just took her out shopping all day? Corey overheard all this and told her that if she wants to be mean to me, then she doesn't need to have one. As all of this is going on, Corey and I were trying to fill in the gaps with each other. He didn't know she had asked for soda again, and I didn't know he had already told her no. It was sort of a confused mess. As we started to realize each other's encounters with Sarah this evening, I started to shut down, and he was visibly annoyed with the situation.

During dinner, Corey pulled Sarah aside and talked to her. She tried to pull the "I wish I was at my mom's" card. Corey told if she wants to go to her mom's then he will take her because he doesn't appreciate the way she is acting towards me. She ended up apologizing. It was nice to see Corey standing up for me, and for us.

A few minutes later all the kids got their popsicles… including Sarah, who had already been told she wasn't allowed to have one. Corey made her throw it away, and she threw a major temper tantrum.

When we went home, Sarah went to bed and Corey and I had a long talk. I told him that next time Sarah wants a girls' day I am going to say no. I started to cry, and told

him I was frustrated and sad, but also angry. I told him some days I hate being a stepparent.

March 25, 2014

I stayed home from work today because Sarah has pink eye. We hung out and watched movies. I was technically working from home for the day so I had some stuff I was working on. That afternoon, Sarah's mom came to pick her up. I was really surprised by how Sarah was acting. She kept talking back to her mom, being disrespectful to her mom and blatantly not listening to her mom. At one point Sarah was trying to make her mom take her backpack and when her mom said "No. I am not your slave," Sarah grabbed her mom's arm and actually put the backpack on it.

Watching this, I realized that perhaps Sarah has more respect for me than I thought. I know in a million years, Sarah would never even try to do that to me. It was definitely eye opening, especially given what happened on Saturday with her being bratty to me. Maybe she respects me more than I had thought…maybe I am being too sensitive…

March 27, 2014

We went to dinner as a family tonight and it was great. Corey and I have been talking about getting her into some sort of sport or activity. I asked her to think about what she would want to do and gave a few suggestions (dance, soccer, gymnastics, basketball, guitar lessons, etc.). We were talking about different types of dance and she was saying she might want to try cheer. Corey got up to go to the bathroom and out of nowhere, Sarah says "I am sorry about girls' day."

I was really taken back. I replied "What are you talking about?"

"Sorry for being mean to you after girls' day," she repeated.

"It is okay Sarah. I forgive you. Thank you for the apology."

Later that night I asked Corey if he put her up to that. He said no. I was not only surprised that she apologized, but surprised she did it on her own and at such a random time. It is in moments like this that I realize she really is growing up. I don't know if it was that we were talking about something she was interested, or maybe that the other day she was just caught up in the moment with her friends. I hope that maybe she is finally starting to see that do I love her and realize that we can be close, even though she is also close to her mom.

She did say something sort of sad. At one point in the evening, after the apology and as we continued to talk about cheerleading, I told her she is my favorite little girl. She replied, "Yeah I know...but when you have your own kid I won't be anymore."

This crushed me. I nearly busted out in tears. I told her she will always be my first favorite no matter what. I wonder if she feels like this often or just at this moment. If she feels this way all the time, maybe that is why she sometimes seems so hesitant to get close to me. I don't know. I wish there was some sort of stepparent handbook that could give me the answers to all my questions and worries, so I wasn't left having to make guesses about everything all the time.

March 28, 2014

Corey took Sarah to school this morning. He called me when he dropped her off. He sounded really excited and happy. Apparently she asked if she has to go to her mom's today and that she wanted to stay with us. That has never happened…ever. Both of us definitely had a little extra bounce of happiness in our step that day. I know it shouldn't

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feel like a competition, but it sometimes feels really good to know Sarah had a nice week

here, even with the hiccups that happened in the weekend. It feels nice to know she

wishes she could stay over here a little longer. It feels nice to not feel rejected.

April 7, 2014

Sarah is back over at our house this week and I feel like I have barely seen her.

She had a friend over on Sunday, so she was pretty occupied. On Thursday, we went to a

recital at Sarah's school. She did so well and you could tell she was nervous. While they

were standing on stage, she kept making faces at me and then I would make them back at

her. It was definitely bothering her mom that Sarah was being silly with me and ignoring

her. The thing that sucked was that after the recital, Sarah didn't want anything to do

with me. It was like I was a stranger or outsider. She barely wanted anything to do with

Corey either. We tried to ignore it and just go with the flow. I was so proud of her and I

was grateful for the silly moment her and I were able to have. I was able to help calm her

nerves. That was enough for me. I know she probably feels like she has to choose sides,

or that she cannot be close with everyone at once. I sometimes forget how hard it can be

for her to be in this situation too.

April 16, 2014

Today we went to an Art Show that Sarah was featured in. She was one of a

handful of children whose art was selected to be featured at this event. She was definitely

feeling super proud. She had quite the turn out: Corey and I, her mom, nana and papa, my

parents, and her other grandparents. Of course, her other grandparents acted as though I

am the plague. I know things would be a lot better and less uncomfortable for Sarah if

they didn't act that way towards me. April and I were fine and I think it is always great

for Sarah to see her mom and I as friends, or something like friends. Sarah didn't completely ignore me, but at the same time was not exceptionally interested in my presence. Her mom definitely attempted to command all of Sarah's attention, which worked. It seemed sort of silly of her mom to do this. As I am sure I've mentioned before, Sarah naturally tends to gravitate towards her mom in group settings and distances herself from me in particular around her mom. Sarah barely spoke to me, and didn't even give me a hug goodbye. While I can be okay with being "ignored" I did have a harder time with not even getting a hug goodbye.

April 19, 2014

Today is Saturday. Like all Saturdays, I spent the day doing homework. When I came downstairs to take a break, Sarah perked up and with an excited tone asked, "Are you done?!"

"Nope," I said, "I wish though!" Jokingly I asked, "Do you want to finish my homework for me?"

She replied with a long, dragged out "No."

When I was finally finished with homework, we had some errands to run. While Sarah was upstairs putting her shoes on, Corey told me that when I was doing homework, Sarah kept telling him she can't wait for me to be done with school so "we can all hang out and do fun things." It was nice to hear that.

One thing has been worrying me lately. Since January, Sarah and Corey have made Monday night when I am at school Daddy-Daughter date nights. I feel like this special time that Sarah spends with her Dad has made the time we are all three together more important to her. It is like she sees me as less of an intruder. I am a little worried

that after I finish class in a few weeks, I am going to disrupt that. When Corey told me that Sarah wishes I was able to be around more instead of in school or doing homework, I felt a little better. But, I am still committed to the idea of them having their Daddy-Daughter date night each week.

April 20, 2014

Today was Easter. Sarah was excited the Easter Bunny came. She got the movie *Frozen*. We decided to have a family movie afternoon. We went to the store and picked up food to make cheeseburger sliders for lunch and popcorn for during the movie. We then all nuzzled into the couch to watch *Frozen.*

After the movie, Sarah was helping Corey make lemonade. I was in the kitchen as well, making cheese cake. It was extremely crowded, noisy and just busy. After they were done making lemonade, Sarah asked me if she could help. I hate to say it but I already felt like it was crowded enough in the kitchen and felt like I needed space and quiet. The day had been so crazy and Sarah-centric. I just wanted to escape into baking for a few minutes. I told her I didn't really need help, even though I am sure I could have found something for her to do. She was disappointed, but sometimes I need some space, even if it is just a moment.

April 24, 2014

Today was Bring Your Son or Daughter to Work Day, which is basically a day when parents are encouraged to bring their children to work with them. I think it is supposed to excite them about career options. I recall going every year with my mom from the time I was in Kindergarten until my Sophomore year of high school. I always enjoyed the extra time with my mom, and especially looked forward to going to lunch

with her at one of our favorite Mexican food restaurants. These were years I fondly remember.

The company I work for is doing a really fun day. They have breakfast planned, a presentation on manners, arts and crafts, and are catering lunch. As soon as I heard about it, I thought Sarah would have a fun time and that perhaps it could be a similar memory for her as it always was for me. Last night, I asked Sarah if she would like to go to work with me and she said yes. She was so cute and excited. She picked out her clothes the night before and all night she kept telling me how much she couldn't wait to go to work with me.

Before going into the office, we stopped at Jamba Juice for smoothies. I had her bring some crayons and coloring books, just in case she got bored with the events the company had planned for the day. From the moment we arrived to my work, Sarah was really impressed. She thought all my co-workers were "cool" and was really interested in learning about everyone's jobs. Throughout the day, people would refer to me as Sarah's mom, versus stepmom. This is an honest mistake, but one I know usually really bothers Sarah. For the first time, Sarah just let it brush of. She didn't get defensive. It was really awesome.

Overall, I think today was a good bonding experience. She asked me if she could come again next year. I smiled and said of course! Today was a day I felt like she was proud to be my step kid.

Chapter 7: Analysis and Findings

Although the above narrative is an example of one experience between a stepparent and stepchild, we can use this narrative to understand the dialectic tensions

present within stepparent and stepchild interpersonal relationships by using thematic analysis to identify existing and emerging dialectics. Although the narrative above captures a 10 month time period within this relationship and will serve as the primary set of data for analysis, it is important to note that my relationship with my stepdaughter did not begin nor end with this journal. Therefore, there are moments from before this journal and since this journal that may influence these findings and/or provide additional context to the data. Additionally, my feelings around stepparenting are also shaped by own experiences as a stepchild. These stories are also important for providing context to the analysis, and as such will be noted when appropriate. In addition to discovering the dialectic tensions present, we can also use this narrative to assess how these tensions are managed within the relationship, how the relationship is defined and redefined throughout the relationship, and what meaning is created as both stepparent and stepchild move between these tensions.

After reviewing my account of my relationship with my stepdaughter, two dialectic tensions identified in previous research on stepfamilies were present: *emotional closeness-distance,* and *past-present* (Baxter et al., 2004; Baxter, 2009). Within these existing tensions, some new themes not previously discussed by Baxter et al. (2004) and Baxter (2009) emerge, such as the dialectic of *present-future*. Additional tensions not identified in the previous work on stepparent-stepchild relationships also emerged through my personal narrative: *autonomy-connection* (with regard to the stepparenting role)*,* and *friend-parent.* Although *autonomy-connection* has been identified as a common dialectic tension in interpersonal relationships, the application of *autonomy-connection* to the stepparent role has not been discussed the previous research reviewed. The dialectic

tensions identified through my personal narrative are discussed in detail below. I begin

first with a review of the dialectic tensions existing in previous research and the emergent

themes that exist within these existing dialectic tensions, and then continue by discussing

the dialectic tensions which emerged through analysis of my personal narrative.

The Dialectic of Emotional Closeness-Distance

The dialectic of *emotional closeness-distance,* was identified by Baxter et al.

(2004) during their study of stepchildren. *Emotional closeness-distance* is characterized

by expressions of having or desiring a deep personal connection, which is balanced by

expressions reflecting the need for distance. For stepchildren, this balancing can be

found within the expressions of intentionally maintaining distance, yet using words which

describe desiring a close relationship. Although Baxter et al. (2004) studied the dialectic

of *emotional closeness-distance* as experienced by stepchildren, this study reveals that the

dialectic of *emotional closeness-distance* is also experienced by stepparents. While both

my stepdaughter and I experienced this relational tension, we experienced, responded to,

and managed this tension in our own unique way. In order to achieve a rich

understanding of this dialectic tension within stepparent-stepchild relationships, I begin

by analyzing the presence of *emotional closeness-distance* I experienced and continue by

analyzing my stepdaughter's experience of managing *emotional closeness-distance.*

Because of my stepdaughter's young age and potentially limited understanding of

relationship development and maintenance, I rarely discussed our relationship with her. I

often negotiated and tried to make sense of the feelings associated with the dialectic of

emotional closeness-distance within my journal.   This desire for relational closeness

began in the first journal entry on August 11th when I describe wanting the relationship

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between my stepdaughter and me to be strong and continued to be a recurring theme throughout the 10 month time period. Evidence of desired emotional closeness occurred at several points, such as when I describe wanting more one on one time with my stepdaughter (August 24th), when I describe wanting to be present more often versus missing out on potentially making memories as a family (September 4th), and in multiple entries where I describe hoping to develop a more rich bond and/or hoping a moment will translate into a more rich bond with my stepdaughter in order to help us become what I perceive to be a successfully blended stepfamily (August 21st, August 24th, February 4th, February 24th and April 24th). In each of these accounts, the words I used to describe the interaction or to describe what I wanted from the relationship indicate I seek closeness within my relationship with my stepdaughter, which I believe is necessary in order to develop into my idea of a successfully blended stepfamily.

Although many of the moments in which I negotiated emotional closeness occurred introspectively, there were instances in which this dialectic tension emerged within my actions towards my stepdaughter or within verbal exchanges. While these moments were less frequent, they are still important for understanding how this tension is managed. I communicated desired closeness to my stepdaughter through my words and actions in moments such as: when I took my daughter to breakfast and focused the conversation on showing interest in her week at school, her time at her mom's house and on her hobbies (August 24th), missing school to go trick or treating with her (November 4th), and when I asked my stepdaughter if I could help with drying her hair (October 8th). In each of these moments, I am attempting to build a relationship and achieve closeness by trying to approach the relationship as a friend. Thus, it is evident that in addition to

journaling about wanting closeness, a second way I am managing my desire for closeness

is by following the advice of clinicians and trying to approach the relationship more like

a friend to try to close the distance between my stepdaughter (Cissna et al., 1990; Fine,

Coleman & Ganong, 1998; Pasley et al., 1993; Schrodt, 2006; Svare et al., 2004).

In addition to following the advice of clinicians, the ways that emotional

closeness towards or from my stepdaughter presents itself throughout my personal

narrative reflects findings of previous scholars about stepmother role expectations.

Recalling from above, previous scholars have found that biological fathers tend to expect

stepmothers to take an active role in parenting. As a result, stepmothers often

overcompensate to avoid falling into the evil stepmom stereotype (Svare, 2014). Within

the narrative, I describe feeling like the "evil stepmom" or wanting to avoid being

perceived as an "evil stepmom" several times. In retrospect, my fear of being perceived

as the "evil stepmom" not only stems from prominent cultural stereotype, but also from

my own experience as a stepchild. As a teenager, I did not have a close relationship with

my former stepfather. He was a very rigid, military man. He believed in strict discipline,

with no exceptions. I often found myself despising him and thinking he was trying to be

mean to me or that he was trying to replace my father. In my young mind, he was my

"evil stepfather". Thus, when I became a stepparent, I knew I did not want my

stepdaughter to have the same view of me that I had of my former stepfather. In some

ways I projected my stepparent-stepchild relationship as a child onto my stepdaughter,

assuming that she must see me as "evil".

Additionally, although this fear may have stemmed partially from the desire to

avoid this stereotype based on my own experiences as a stepchild, it was compounded by

the accusations from my stepdaughter that I was "mean", which had occurred prior to this journal beginning, and were noted within the journal on September 9th, September 11th. When she would state to others that she thought I was mean to her, it was difficult for me to not take it personally because I so deeply desire a relationship different than that of what I had with my former stepfather. It is important to note that biological parents experience this same response from children when they do not get their way, however they react to it differently. As noted on September 9th, my stepdaughter said **we** are mean to her. Because of my fear of being an "evil stepmom" and my own experience as a stepchild, I took this personally – almost as if she said I alone was mean to her. In contrast, my husband was able to brush it off easily stating that "If Sarah thinks I'm mean, oh well" (September 11th).

Although I may not consciously have known it at the moment, upon analyzing my personal narrative and reflecting on my own experience with a stepparent, it seems as though I am often trying to overcome this stereotype through closeness. In reviewing the different moments in which desired closeness is expressed, I found several instances in which I am trying to do something to impress my stepdaughter. These instances where I am trying to impress her include taking her to breakfast (August 24th), trying to help her (October 8th), trying to be her friend by helping her with "girl drama" at school (February 4th), taking her to get green nail polish for St. Patrick's Day (March 16th) and bringing her to Take Your Child To Work Day (April 24th). This finding aligns with the previous research and suggests that emotional closeness attempts may be partially driven by the desire to overcome stereotypes and adapt to the expected role behaviors that biological fathers have for their new wives.

While in general I align more closely with desiring closeness, I also expressed a need for distance from my stepdaughter at multiple points within my personal narrative. The desire for distance is primarily expressed within my reflections in my journal rather than through direct communication with my stepdaughter. On several occasions (September 11th, October 7th, February 18th, March 24th), I describe feeling like I will never be good enough in my stepdaughter's eyes and that my relationship building efforts feel in vain. Additionally, on multiple occasions after my attempts at closeness are rejected by my stepdaughter, I would close myself off emotionally or attempt to create space between us. Examples of this occur in the entries on January 12th, February 14th, and March 24th, when I describe needing to go into self preservation mode, or telling my stepdaughter we do not have to spend time together if she does not want to. While the circumstances surrounding my distancing attempts varied, in each of these instances, a theme emerges that indicates distance is sought in response to feeling rejected by my stepdaughter. My feelings align with the findings of Ganong et al. (2011) and Pasley (1985) who note that stepparents often feel like an outsider, feel inadequate and that stepparents describe not feeling mutual love or mutual respect from their stepchildren. As such, it seems likely that other stepparents might experience desiring distance in similar ways. This also supports the idea that dialectic tensions are experienced and managed within the context of the relationship and not within a vacuum. In other words, the interactions in which my closeness attempts face rejection results in a detachment from that pole and a re-alignment towards distance as I attempt to renegotiate the meaning of my relationship with my stepdaughter.

Although the experience I had aligned with the previous research of Ganong et al. (2011) and Pasley (1985), another thing to consider is whether or not these moments I perceive as deviance, inadequacy, and a lack of love or respect are exclusive to the stepparent experience. The moments in which I felt this way often resulted from some form of her testing boundaries. Developing children in general will push their parents' boundaries, which I witnessed my stepdaughter do with her biological mother. For example, on March 25th, I noted that Sarah was not listening to her mother about her backpack and was pushing the boundary of who was going to carry the backpack by placing the backpack on her mother's arm and letting go. In that journal entry, I note that "Sarah would never even try to do that to me". Thus, although her efforts to test the boundaries with me were often perceived as threats to the relationship, in fact, these moments may indicate that she does see me as a parent after all.

Finally, previous literature on emotional closeness-distance also notes both emotional closeness and distance can be experienced simultaneously (Baxter et. al, 2004). This is most evident as I describe both wanting to fight the evil stepmother stereotype and not caring if I am perceived as the evil stepmom. For example, on September 11th I describe feeling frustrated about being perceived as the evil stepmom and wanting to be close with my stepdaughter, yet also describe being tired of feeling like the bad guy all the time and wanting to distance myself from the relationship. Additionally, on October 7th I describe a conversation with my mother in which I again describe feeling frustrated by feeling like my attempts to debunk the evil stepmom stereotype are failing, yet then describe not wanting to keep fighting against the stereotype and not caring if my stepdaughter views me as her "evil stepmom". These instances are evidence that

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stepparents, like the stepchildren of previous studies, do not experience emotional closeness and distance as mutually exclusive experiences but rather negotiate these relational tensions at the same time.

Although I never interviewed my stepdaughter about our relationship, indicators that the dialectic of e*motional closeness-distance* towards and from me is experienced by stepdaughter can be found within my personal narrative. While my experience with this tension is often reflected within my communication via my journal, instances of my stepdaughter experiencing this tension are primarily found in her direct, verbal communication. This communication was either with directly with me or with her father and communicated to me via him. I focus my analysis on these instances two reasons. First, since I did not interview her for this study, I am only able to speculate as to what dialectic tensions she was experiencing at a point in time. These moments require the least speculation into what she is feeling at a particular moment since they are descriptions of her feelings in her own words. Second, because she is a developing child and I wanted to eliminate moments that could be characterized as normal child defiance from the analysis of distance. For example, I excluded moments in which she is not listening to me, ignoring what I tell her to do, or being disrespectful, as these are acts of defiance common to developing children who are testing or learning behavioral boundaries. Furthermore, these are actions that I have witnessed her do towards her biological parents as well, which further supports the idea that these moments are boundary tests rather than evidence of her distancing from me specifically. For each instance of distance I identified, I contemplated whether or not this act of distance something she has done towards her biological mother or father before. For example, on

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November 18th, I describe my stepdaughter as having a bad attitude towards me and not listening. This is a moment I have chosen to exclude from the evidence of her experiencing emotional distance from me because, like many young children, she does not always listen to her biological parents and/or tests boundaries with them as well. Other examples of the types of responses and actions I excluded from my analysis of her emotional distance were things like on February 14th and March 24th when she gave me dirty looks, or on March 24th when she was rolling her eyes at me when I spoke to her. This question and frame of reference became my guide for separating what would be analyzed from moments that would be dismissed as normal behavior for a developing child of her age.

My stepdaughter demonstrates evidence of managing emotional closeness in two common ways: by statements of affection, such as telling me she loves me or giving me a hug, and by stating she wants to spend time with me. My stepdaughter showed affection by telling me she loved me or by offering a hug at several moments within the personal narrative such as August 21st, September 13th, October 10th, November 4th, November 12th, and March 16th. It is important to note that not every day, nor conversation, during the ten month period, was documented. Thus there are additional instances of these expressions of affection that transpired over the period from August to May that were unaccounted for in my personal narrative. These expressions of affection indicate that she feels emotionally close to me at a particular moment.

The second common expression of closeness came in the instances in which she either asks me if we can spend time together, or expresses to her father that she wants to spend time with me. For example, on August 24th, March 16th, March 21st, and April

20th my stepdaughter asked me if her and I could do something together, just the two of us. Additionally, on April 24th, when I asked my stepdaughter to come to work with me for "Bring Your Daughter to Work Day", she expressed to me that she was excited to come to work with me because she wanted to spend time with me. As noted above, my stepdaughter's expressions of desiring to spend time with me were not just directed at me, but also occurred during conversations with her father which were relayed to me. For example, on August 31st, my stepdaughter told her father she had fun spending time with me on August 24th. Additionally, on April 19th, my stepdaughter told her father she could not wait for me to be done with school so "we can all hang out and do fun things". These moments within the personal narrative demonstrate that in addition to verbally or physically demonstrating affection towards me, my stepdaughter seeks a close relationship with me, and feels joy when her need for closeness is being reciprocated.

While expressions of affection and expressions seeking to spend time together were the two primary ways in which my stepdaughter demonstrated emotional closeness, a final instance that does not fit neatly into the previously defined categories that, although less frequent, cannot be ignored occurred on February 4th. On February 4th my stepdaughter showed she trusts me when after having "girl talk" my stepdaughter tells her father she can tell me anything. While this occurrence was not something that occurred with frequency, the magnitude of it is quite large, particularly as my stepdaughter starts to transition into early adolescence. In previous months, my stepdaughter believed that I was often "mad at her" or "mean" (August 24th, September 9th, September 11th, October 7th, February 18th, and March 24th). Thus, to transition from thinking I was "mean" to feeling though she can tell me anything seems to be a transition requiring emotional

closeness. Furthermore, this seems to align with previous research on acceptance/rejection of stepparents by stepchildren (Ganong et al., 2011), and suggests that the relationship building activities I have engaged in with the intention of achieving closeness may be resulting in increasing the degree of acceptance my stepdaughter has for me as she begins to evaluate my contributions as being of benefit to her.

Previous research on stepparent and stepchild relationships notes stepchildren balance moments of closeness with distance (Baxter et. al, 2004). Baxter et. al (2004) found that many stepchildren they interviewed as part of their study expressed intentionally maintaining distance from their stepparents, while simultaneously expressing the desire for a close relationship. For example, one participant noted "Well, I guess it's not like we're real close. Like, I can talk to her like a friend … but I don't think I have ever told her that I loved her." (Baxter et al., 2004, p. 455). In this account, closeness (as evidenced by the stepchild seeing her stepmom as a friend and even loving her) is balanced by distance (stating that she is not close with her stepmom despite seeing her as a friend). Their findings suggested that loyalty conflicts, or feeling torn between the relationship with a stepparent and the relationship with the same sex, biological parent, are a major reason why stepchildren balance closeness with distance (Baxter et al., 2004).

As noted above, when identifying indictors of emotional distance, I wanted to exclude actions that could be argued as normal defiance act for developing children, thus, I excluded moments in which she was not listening to me, ignoring what I tell her to do, being disrespectful, as indicators of distance. In doing so, I discovered my stepdaughter most often communicated desiring distance in the statements and actions which indicate a

preference towards her biological mother. For example, on February 7th, my stepdaughter appeared to take offense to another child at the park asking her if I was her mother. Additionally, on November 4th, April 7th, and April 16th, during outings in which both her biological mother and I were present, my stepdaughter would shy away from me. I noted in my narrative on April 7th that it almost seems as though "she probably feels like she has to choose sides or that she cannot be close with everyone at once".

While a preference for the biological parent is considered normal for children of stepfamilies, I included these instances as indicators of distance because of the finding that distancing is a result of loyalty conflicts by Ganong et al. (2011) and Baxter et al. (2004), and because as a stepchild myself, I recall intentionally distancing myself from my former stepfather because I felt I needed to protect my father's feelings. Although loyalty conflicts may be common experiences for stepchildren, the distancing that is found to occur within the narrative because of these loyalty conflicts supports previous research, and therefore is relevant for this study. Furthermore, these moments of distance, despite being driven by the desire of a child to protect their parent's feelings, influence and reshape the relationship between the stepparent and stepchild. Thus, although these moments are the result of a common phenomenon, they are relevant for understanding how stepchildren manage their relationships with their stepparents and biological parents simultaneously. In these scenarios, the loyalty conflict not only appears to be an issue when her biological mother is present, but also when my step-daughter seems to perceive a threat to her mother's identity as her mom, such as at the park (February 7th). Thus, the

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experience I have had with my stepdaughter over the 10 month time period documented supports the previous findings by Ganong et al. (2011) and Baxter et al. (2004).

The dialectic of *emotional closeness-distance* within stepparent and stepchild relationships has implications for stepparents who are trying to better understand their relationship with their stepchild. Although all stepfamilies are unique, which is one of the reasons previous researchers have studied them so frequently, within my step-relationship these findings suggest that both my stepdaughter and I overall tend to desire a close relationship but this is balanced by distance. Moments in which we sought distance were often a result of internal and external pressures. For me, these pressures were a fear of being perceived as an evil stepmother, which was felt more intensely during times of rejection. For my stepdaughter, distance was driven by loyalty conflicts she was experiencing. Understanding the influence of these factors suggests that perhaps relational cues interpreted by how each of us acted within a particular moment may be misunderstood or misinterpreted which affects other parts of the relationship. As will be discussed in the upcoming discussion, the knowledge of the factors that trigger distance within step-relationships can be used to help reduce relational uncertainty by normalizing and contextualizing behaviors, which can ultimately lead to less reactive distancing and ideally the development of a more meaningful relationship.

As noted in the review of literature, dialectic tensions can overlap with one another. The ways in which the dialectic of *emotional closeness-distance* are managed can inform and trigger other dialectic tensions, such as the dialectic of *past-present* (and ultimately *present-future),* and the dialectic of *autonomy-connection.* In the following

section, I explore the dialectic of *past-present*, as well as the emergent dialectic of *present-future.*

The Dialectic of Past-Present

The dialectic of *past-present* was also identified within previous research on stepfamilies. Baxter (2009) found that this dialectic is frequently present within stepfamilies, as there is a struggle between managing the meaning of the old family and the new family, and efforts to define the new stepfamily serves as a threat to the memory of the old family. As noted above, dialectic tensions can overlap with one another. The dialectic of p*ast-present* is interrelated with *emotional closeness-distance,* as both *past* and *distance* tensions have loyalty conflicts in common (Baxter et al., 2004) in that the past is triggered by loyalty conflicts, which result in *distance*. Within my personal narrative, I identified the presence of this dialectic by the instances in which my stepdaughter seems to have reservations about forging a relationship with me based on her relationship with her biological mother, which is common of children as they work through loyalty conflicts (Baxter at al., 2004; Ganong et al., 2011). However, this analysis also reveals that this dialectic does not stop with the present, but continues into the future, creating a dialectic tension between *present-future*. Although this dialectic tension expands upon the existing dialectic of *past-present*, the dialectic of *present-future* is an emergent dialectic tension discovered via this study. In the following paragraphs, the manifestation of the dialectic of *past-present*, as well as the emergence of a *present-future* dialectic within our relationship is explored in depth.

The dialectic of *past-present* manifests itself through loyalty conflicts. Recalling from above, loyalty conflicts or struggles occur most often when the stepchild is close to

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their biological, same sex parent (Ganong et al., 2011). In these contexts, the child perceives the new relationship with the stepparent to threaten the existing relationship they have with their biological parent. I noted on November 4th, April 7th, and April 16th that my stepdaughter appears to be torn between her desire for a relationship with me, and how a relationship with me will affect her mother's feelings. In particular, I noted how my stepdaughter gravitates towards her mother, while ignoring me, when we are in a group setting.

Another instance where loyalty conflicts arise occurred when my stepdaughter was asked by another child if I was her mother (February 7th). In this moment, my stepdaughter responded quickly and defensively. This is evidence that the innocent assumption of another child that I was her mother was perceived as a threat to her relationship with her biological mother. In this moment, my stepdaughter suddenly shifted from being able to maintain the two relationships simultaneously, to needing to defend her biological mother's identity and role in her absence. While I initially believed this abrupt distancing to be a "normal" child behavior, I still found myself feeling discouraged by it. I would often react to my stepdaughter's attempts at managing the *past-present* dialectic personally. I would feel as though I was being dismissed as unimportant (January 12th, February 7th, April 16th) or feel resentment that I was not her real mother (January 12[th,] February 7th). This was compounded by the fact that I was focusing so much effort on improving the relationship, which made her responses feel like a personal attack. Upon reading previous work on loyalty conflicts, it became more evident that this is a behavior indicates she is trying to protect the feelings of her biological mother, rather than some sort of personal attack against me. The evidence of

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these loyalty conflicts presence within the 10 month period shows my stepdaughter is attempting to manage the tension between developing a relationship with me (present) with the perceived threat to her existing relationship with her biological mother (past) and sheds light onto how her negotiation of this dialectic influences me emotionally within the context of our relationship.

In addition to experiencing the dialectic of *past-present*, there is also evidence that there is a dialectic tension between the present and future. Much like the dialectic of *past-present* deals with negotiating and managing the memory of the old family and new family, the dialectic of *present-future* reflects the fear and uncertainty stepchildren may have around the idea of the family evolving. My stepdaughter demonstrates experiencing a *present-future* dialectic when my stepdaughter questions how things will change if her father and I have children together. As noted on March 27th a family outing ended with my stepdaughter expressing concern that if her father and I have children together, she will no longer be loved the same by me. In this conversation, my stepdaughter expresses worry and concern over what another redefinition of her family (adding brothers and/or sisters) will do to her position within the family, as she is currently an only child, and fear that I will love my own children more than I will love her.

The existence of a *past-present-future* dialectic adds to the complexity of step-relationships. Through the *past-present* dialectic, my stepdaughter seems to struggle with what allowing me to be close to her or considering me a parent will do to her mother's feelings; however, through the dialectic of *present-future*, it appears she sees me as a parent. My stepdaughter is fearful that if her father and I were to have children I will not continue to love her any longer or as much. Although she is an only child and it seems

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probable that other only children within traditional family structures also struggle with the *present-future* dialectic, for stepchildren, this dialectic may be driven more by fear of love loss, than by the idea of having to share love. For stepchildren, particularly young stepchildren, their experience with love is that people can stop loving each other. My stepdaughter knows that at one point, her mother and father loved each other, but stopped. Thus, it seems possible that despite her young age, she may understand that love is not always unconditional, and is fearful that I will stop loving her when I have my own child to love too. In this way, the dialectic of *present-future* and fear or uncertainty around the future is fueled by her negotiation of the dialectic of *past-present,* particularly her understanding that people can stop loving one another.

These observations within my personal narrative are important for not only understanding loyalty conflicts and how stepchildren adjust to their new family structures, particularly when there is a potential for additional children to be brought into the family, but also to traditional families who are introducing a second child into the family.

The dialectics of *past-present* and *present-future* as managed by stepchildren also has implications for stepparents who are trying to better understand their relationship with their stepchild. The findings about *past-present* dialectics that stepchildren experience is useful in that it suggests that distancing behaviors stepchildren exhibit may not be as simple as them rejecting their stepparent. As will be discussed in detail later, these understandings can help stepparents better understand their own relationship and offers context for their own relationships, particularly with regard to why stepchildren are motivated to distance themselves from their stepparent.

Furthermore, the findings about a *present-future* dialectic are useful for understanding the ways in which their relationship may be impacted by fear. If stepchildren fear losing their stepparents love, attention or affection it is possible that stepchildren might keep their stepparents at a distance for emotional-preservation reasons. As will also be discussed later, these findings are not only important to stepparents as they attempt to navigate their relationships with their stepchildren but also to biological parents who are remarried and having more children.

Through the analysis of my personal narrative, it is evident that as a stepparent I also experience the *past-present* dialectic. While my stepdaughter's experience with this dialectic was a result of loyalty conflicts, my experience with this dialectic is a result of becoming a parent by marriage versus by choice.   In this way the past is represented by moments when I negotiate my feelings around my choice to become a parent, and how I may not have been fully prepared for what that means, and the present is represented by expressions of wishing I was her mother or wanting to be seen as a parental figure by outsiders. This negotiation is discussed in detail below.

Within my personal narrative, there are moments in which I describe feeling joy about being a stepparent (October 2nd) and even wish that I was her mother (January 12th). I also describe wishing that even though I am not her mother, she would accept me as a mother-like person in her life (February 7th). This desire is so great, that I found myself researching information on how to build a strong relationship with my stepdaughter (August 15th and October 3rd). These moments are evidence that I have embraced the parent-like role in inherited through marriage. Not only do I actively try to figure out how to be a parent in this new, established by marriage family structure, but I

also have moments were I feel disappointment that I do not get to call myself her mother. I even describe this disappointment as resentment. Because of this, I often take moments that are normal behaviors for a developing child, such as talking back, saying I am mean, or not listening to me, as personal attacks that threaten this parental identity I long for.

While I long for a parental identity in the familial structure, I also recognize that I was not entirely ready to have a child, and perhaps did not fully understand what becoming a parent through marriage means. In these moments, I manage my alignment to the past relational pole of the *past-present* dialectic. The most telling moments within this dialectic occur on September 22nd and October 7th. On September 22nd, I describe feeling frustrated that my husband expects me to fulfill mothering duties without recognizing that I was not ready to have children, particularly when I have other things, such as my education and career, that I have prioritized above having children at this stage in my life. On October 7th, this internal negotiation of *past-present* becomes a conversation between my husband and me. In particular, I describe telling my husband that sometimes I feel like I wish I could go back in time and tell myself to really contemplate and consider the fact that being with him means I also jump into a parenting role before I am ready. Other moments that reflects my negotiation of the past surface throughout my journal over the 10 month period. For example, I contemplate wanting to disassociate from the family structure a bit (September 11th), describe hating being a stepparent (March 24th), and describe needing some adult time after a long day spending time together as a family (April 20th).

The negotiation of *past-present* I experience within my personal narrative and my relationship with my stepdaughter are important to my experience as a stepparent. These

moments reflect how I am negotiating this new role and the complexities of becoming a parent through marriage, such as my husband wanting me to assume mother-like duties and me feeling guilty at times for not feeling like I was ready to (September 22nd). Given that many stepmothers report feeling a greater degree of depressive symptoms due to their role as stepparents (Svare et al., 2004), my experience with negotiating the *past-present* in this way may shed valuable light on why these emotions may be felt. Furthermore, these moments where I am negotiating the *past-present* also have an effect on how certain situations are handled within the relationship, and result in attempts to become closer and/or to distance myself as noted within the dialectic of *emotional closeness-distance*.

The realization that stepparents also negotiate the memory of their previous, non-parenting life with their present life in a parenting role again highlights the uncertainty and complexity involved in stepparenting. The internal pressures and self doubt that a stepparent may experience, combined with the pressure from their spouses to fulfill a parenting role instantaneously, affects the ability for stepparents to build a meaningful relationship with their stepchildren. Like other dialectics identified so far, the findings surrounding the dialectic of *past-present* that stepparents experience can be used by stepparents to normalize their experience and perhaps find a sense of hope and community in knowing that other stepparents feel the same way.

These findings also inform clinicians on some of the factors that may be contributing to psychological responses such as depression and increased stress. Clinicians can use this understanding to develop tips for stepparents to help them adjust to their new parenting responsibilities more effectively, to cope with stepparent-stepchild

relationship challenges and to manage uncertainty. These topics will be explored in detail in the upcoming discussion on implications of this study.

The next dialectic I will explore is the dialectic of *autonomy-connection*. This dialectic has related to the dialectic of *past-present* that stepparents negotiate, as well as the dialectic of *emotional closeness-distance.*

The Dialectic of Autonomy-Connection

The dialectic of *autonomy-connection* is one of the primary dialectics identified within interpersonal relationships by Baxter (1988, 1990, 2009), although Baxter et al. (2004) did not identify this in the application of RDT to stepfamilies. Recalling from above, the dialectic of *autonomy-connection* is traditionally based on the idea that a relationship cannot exist without giving up some degree of individual autonomy yet recognizes too much connection can cause a loss of individual identity. This dialectic also notes that too much separation can hinder one's identity within a relationship because connections with others are essential for the formation of relational identity (Baxter, 1988; Baxter, 1990; Baxter, 2009). Within my relationship with my stepdaughter I the dialectic of *autonomy-connection* emerged in relation to my role as a stepparent. Thus, for this analysis, autonomy is defined as the expressed desire for independence from the role of stepparenting. This is found in expressions of not wanting to be a stepparent. In contrast, connection is defined as a connection to the stepparenting role, and is found in the expressions of desiring a blended family, wanting to be a parental figure and statements indicative of an identity rooted in the stepparent role.

The dialectic of *autonomy-connection* is related both to the dialectics of emotional *closeness-distance* and the dialectic of *past-present* as I experienced. The

relation is found in that negotiations of *closeness-distance*, and negotiations of *past-present* influence my feelings of *autonomy-connection* to my role as a stepparent. When I am more aligned with the *distance* and *past* poles of each relational tension, I find myself feeling more autonomy from my role as a stepparent. Likewise, when I am more closely aligned with the *closeness* and *present* poles of each relational tension, my connectedness to my role as a stepparent is increased. Throughout my personal narrative, there is evidence of my attempts to manage the movement between *autonomy* and *connection*, which often results from uncertainty.

Most often, I experienced a sense of connection to the role of stepparenting. On several instances, such as August 11th, September 11th, February 14th, I express wanting to have what I perceive to be a successfully blended family, wanting to be a seen as a parent, and feeling a lot of fears around being perceived as an evil stepmom. This fear of being perceived as "evil" is a fear common to stepmothers in particular (Svare et al., 2004). To manage my experience with the dialectic of connection, I conducted research on stepparenting, specifically seeking advice on how to become a better stepparent and/or how to improve my relationship with my stepdaughter (August 11th, October 3rd, and October 28th). After doing this research, I would implement the tactics I read about such as engaging in friendship building activities or trying to work with my husband to form a "we front". My search for advice on how to stepparent aligns with previous research by Ganong et al. (2011) who notes that the stepparent role is less clearly defined than other familial roles, and stepmothers in particular tend to struggle with creating meaningful relationships. Within these moments of my personal narrative, I am deeply invested in my role as a stepparent, and in developing the meaningful relationship I believe to be

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imperative to that role. I am managing this uncertainty by researching what has worked

for others and putting it to the test. In doing this, not only am I attempting to find and

implement strategies to improve my relationship with my stepdaughter, I am actively

attempting to define this role for myself and the rest of the family, and remove the

uncertainty and insecurity I face with my role as a stepparent.

Because of this deep investment in defining the relationship and my role as a

stepparent within the relationship, part of my identity becomes rooted in being what I

consider a "good" stepparent. I note on several occasions feeling like I am succeeding in

this role (October 2nd, November 4th, and April 24th); however, at other times I describe

feeling like I am failing, feeling like I am not or will not be good enough, feeling

discouraged, or fearing being perceived as an evil stepmother (September 11th, February

14th, February 18th, and April 16th). In fact, throughout the narrative a theme emerges

around this, and I seem to obsess over my fear of being classified as an evil stepmother

and how to not be perceived as one. As such, when challenges within the relationship

arise, I take these challenges personally as these challenges are a threat to the identity I

am trying to create.

My connection to my role as a stepparent is balanced by my autonomy from the

role. As the dialectic of *autonomy-connection* notes, interdependence within

relationships is balanced by the need for independence. While I describe a great deal of

connection to my role and identity as a stepparent, I also describe the desire for autonomy

by wanting to give up the relationship or invest less effort in building the relationship at

times. For example, on October 7th, I documented having a conversation with my

husband in which I questioned whether I was capable of continuing to invest so much

effort. Furthermore, on February 18th, I reported feeling like the investment in the relationship with my stepdaughter is pointless and describe not wanting to have a relationship with her. Finally on March 24th, I describe wishing I was not part of a family dinner because I felt like I needed to distance myself from my stepdaughter. After analyzing these moments of autonomy from the stepparent role, it became evident that these moments are not occurring at random. Rather, in each of these moments my need for autonomy from the stepparent role occurs as a result of my own perception of failure in connecting to my stepdaughter. In these moments of perceived failure, I am reminded that I am not a mother, although I am fulfilling mothering duties, and struggle with making meaning of my relational identity. When this uncertainty appears within my role and relationship, the need for independence from the role and relationship becomes greater.

The constant push and pull between autonomy and connection within my experience as a stepparent results in a reorganizing of priorities and an overall redefining of how I approach the relationship throughout the 10 month period. At times I am closely aligned to the stepparent role, while at other times I am distanced further from it in an effort to save face. Given previous research asserts that the stepparent role is riddled with uncertainty (Ganong et al., 2011) it seems highly likely that other stepparents experience this dialectic tension as they attempt to define the stepparent role for themselves.

The dialectic of *autonomy-connection* in relation to previous research noted above and the related dialectics of *past-present* and *emotional closeness-distance* again suggests that uncertainty influences relational satisfaction. As suggested by previous dialectics, if

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uncertainty could be reduced within the stepparent role, stepparents might find themselves feeling more meaning within the role as a stepparent. This increased meaningfulness within their role could to translate into feeling more encouraged throughout the relationship building process and ultimately more positive towards their experience stepparenting. As noted above, the ability of clinicians to help reduce uncertainty for stepparents will be explored later during the discussion of implications.

The final dialectic, *friend-parent*, explores how the clinician recommendations around how to build a positive stepparent-stepchild relationship along with role expectations that spouses of stepparents have intersect. This final dialectic is discussed in detail below.

The Dialectic of Friend – Parent

The final dialectic tension that emerged in my personal narrative was not specifically identified in previous research is the dialectic tension of *friend-parent*. Although this dialectic tension was not specifically identified by previous scholarship on stepfamily relationships and it emerges as a theme within my personal narrative and is fueled by previous scholarship on friendship building approaches. This adds validity to the possibility of generalizing this dialectic tension across stepparent experiences.

Within this dialectic, there is tension between the befriending the child, and parenting. Scholars identified acting to befriend the child as one of the approaches stepparents should take to build a relationship (Cissna et al., 1990; Fine, Coleman & Ganong, 1998; Ganong et al., 2011; Pasley et al., 1993; Schrodt, 2006; Svare et al., 2004); however previous research also notes that stepparents are often expected to take on parenting roles (Svare et al., 2004). Thus, this dialectic tension reflects the uncertainty

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of the stepparent role, the attempts to make meaning within the stepparent role, and how this uncertainty and meaning making efforts emerge through interactions with stepchildren. What is important to note is that this dialectic is not based on how power within the relationship is negotiated, with friend implying equal power and parent implying authority. Instead this dialectic focuses on how relationship building is approached by the stepparent, specifically seeking to understand the moments in which the stepparent applies friendship building tactics and how those moments are negotiated and/or intersect with spousal expectations of assuming traditional parenting roles.

Before discussing how the dialectic of *friend-parent* manifests within my personal narrative, it is important to note that this narrative only captures a 10 month time period. Although during the time period documented by the personal narrative I most often attempted to build the relationship with my stepdaughter through friendship (which will be discussed in detail below), that was not always the case. I became a stepparent nearly two years before I started keeping my journal. When I first became a stepparent, I knew even less about what the role meant for me than I do now, nor did I know what my responsibilities should or should not be. I had an assumption that I should take on half of the parenting duties, including discipline. Knowing what I know now but learned about through the course of my research on improving relationships with stepchildren which was conducted in conjunction with keeping my journal, I did not adhere to the advice laid forth by clinicians. I over asserted my authority before my stepdaughter had granted it me, which put strain on our relationship and resulted in my choice to begin keeping a journal to negotiate this experience for myself in the first place. However, as I began to seek advice and information on stepparenting, I began to adjust my approach to parenting

in order to balance it with friendship. My movement between a parenting approach, a befriending approach, and sometimes a blend of these two approaches were captured within my personal narrative and are described below.

During my personal narrative, I moved between a friendship mentality and a parenting mentality at different points in my personal narrative. In particular, I show a closer alignment to the friendship pole on August 11th when we went to breakfast and discussed school, on October 2nd when my stepdaughter and I planned her birthday party, on February 4th when we had "girl talk" about some drama my stepdaughter was having at school. In each of these instances, I offered support and/or attempted to bond with my stepdaughter by discussing common activities, and showing interest in her school-life and personal-life, as recommended by clinicians in the stepparenting tips I found. Given that I noted reading stepparents should take a more supportive role versus a parenting role on August 11th, it seems likely that this information I read may have contributed to my friendship building attempts over the period covered in my personal narrative.

The dialectic of friendship is balanced by the dialectic of parenting, which I also aligned myself with during the 10 month period. For example, on September 22nd I told my stepdaughter I do not appreciate her giving me dirty looks and told her to stop. Additionally, on January 12th, I reminded my stepdaughter that she needs to listen to me because I am a parent too. Finally, on March 24, I took the lead on telling my stepdaughter she cannot have any soda. Other moments in which I took on a parenting approach to the relationship with my stepdaughter throughout my narrative, were moments when I would talk to her about her behavior at school, specifically her being on blue on her behavior chart. In these moments, my approach to stepparenting took on less

of a friend role and a more authoritative parenting role, although the degree of authority I asserted varied based on the state of our relationship at a given point in time and whether or not my husband was present for the conversation too.

Something interesting to note about the dialectic of friend-parent within my stepparent experience is that there were moments in which I would move from a friend-like approach to a parenting approach within the same interaction. For example, on October 2nd, while helping my stepdaughter plan her birthday party, I observed she had been drawing on her upper thighs with a marker and quickly shifted from talking about her party to being more authoritative as I told her not to do that again and explained that where she was drawing in particular is inappropriate. Another instance in which the line between these tensions was blurred was on February 4th when we had "girl talk" about some drama my stepdaughter was having with other girls at school. Although I attempted to convey to my stepdaughter that we were just two girls having girl talk, I also noted that I had an agenda which was to help my stepdaughter realize she needs to stay away from this other girl at school. These moments in which I moved from friend to parent within the same interaction reflect the role uncertainty described in previous research on stepfamilies (Ganong et al., 2011).

For stepparents, the emergence of this dialectic informs understandings about how stepparents navigate their parental role, particularly in light of clinician recommendations about building a friendship and the conflicting expectations that biological parents have of their spouses with regard to fulfilling parenting roles. The key finding about this dialectic is that it explores how this role is difficult for stepparents to assume and continues the theme of uncertainty experienced that is found in the other

dialectics. Again, the experience accounted for in my journal can help have a normalizing effect for stepparents who are likely going through something similar as they attempt to navigate the boundaries of their role and fulfill role expectations.

Furthermore, the emergence of this dialectic aligns with previous research about stepparent acceptance, and suggests that when the relationship between a stepparent and stepchild is stronger, the stepchild is more likely to accept parental authority from stepparents. Although this dialectic continues to highlight the theme of uncertainty stepparents experience, as noted above, the emergence of this dialectic also simultaneously can help stepparents reduce uncertainty by perhaps identifying moments and relational cues which they can used to determine whether or not they it is appropriate for them to exert more or less authority.   The implication of this finding will also be explored in more detail during the discussion of implications below.

Summary

The dialectic tensions experienced by both my stepdaughter and I are significant for understanding how meaning is being created, and re-defined within the context of step- relationships. It is not my intention to show the stepparent-stepchild relationship as being one that is sometimes connected and other times distanced. Nor is it my intention to describe stepparenting as being a fulfilling role, and other times a role that is unwanted or overly uncertain. It is also not my intention to suggest that sometimes my stepdaughter sometimes accepted me and other times rejected me. Instead my intention is to call attention to how these various relational tensions work together to create a greater, complex relational context that is continually evolving. This complexity is driven significantly by stepparent uncertainty, but also stems from factors such as loyalty

conflicts and my reaction to them, my interpretation of behaviors characterized as boundary testing, my own experiences with being a stepchild and how I project those onto my relationship with my stepdaughter, and my navigation through the experiencing of parenting and my approaches to parenting. Each of these factors, as well as my understanding of them both at the time and retrospectively, not only shaped the relationship during the 10 months documented by this study but for the future of the relationship as well. This results in a continual shaping and reshaping of the relationship as it moves forward through time.

As noted by previous scholars, adjusting to a new family structure is complex and complicated for both adults and children. I struggled throughout the 10 month period with seeking both closeness and distance, with autonomy and connection to my role, and with trying to be both a friend and a parent. I often felt the push and pull of multiple relational tensions simultaneously and at times struggled to manage these successfully within the relationship. Likewise, my personal narrative reveals that my stepdaughter also struggled to manage several relational tensions surrounding her relationship with me and with what that relationship would mean for her relationship with her biological mother. She also seemed to struggle with what her role in her new family would be if she were to have half siblings.

Thus, the analysis of my personal narrative confirms, and provides additional evidence for, the complexity faced by stepparents and stepchildren not only when it comes to creating meaningful relationships, but also in defining and redefining these relationships as relational tensions are introduced and managed. In the final pages of this study, I will explore in detail the various implications that the findings contained herein

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have for family communication, stepparents, spouses of stepparents, parents in traditional

family structures. I will also account for limitations of this study and discuss areas of

future research.

Chapter 8: Discussion

The findings in the above analysis further extend family communication

scholarship on stepfamilies in a manner that both furthers and discipline and can be used

by individuals and clinicians alike. These findings are grounded in theory and support the

research findings of previous scholars about the complexity and uncertainty stepfamilies

are prone to. Noting from above, previous scholars describe the stepfamily structure as

one that is "starting with handicaps" (Cissna et al., 1990; Satir, 1972, p.173), and out of

all the relationships existing within a family, the relationship between a stepparent and

stepchild is considered to be the most challenging and stressful (Schrodt, 2006). The

choice to use RDT as a framework for understanding enhances knowledge on several

stepparenting topics, particularly highlighting the uncertainty that stepparents experience

as they attempt to navigate their new parenting role and build a satisfying relationship

with their stepchildren. This also furthers existing knowledge on how stepchildren make

sense of the new family structure and their relationship with their stepparent. These

findings have implications for family communication, particularly offering support for

two main findings from previous scholarship on stepfamilies: evidence of loyalty

conflicts and the uncertainty stepparents face. Additionally, the study provides insight

into the stepparent experience, expands upon already known dialectics within step-

relationships and identifies new dialectics experienced, such as *present-future*. Finally,

this study has implications for stepparents and spouses of stepparents, and even for new

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parents and parents in traditional family structures, who can each leverage various parts

of this study as a means of contextualizing their own parent-child relationships, and

normalizing events and emotions that are triggered within these relationships. Such

findings can help stepparents in particular reduce uncertainty within their own

relationships. These implications are discussed in more detail below.

Implications of Dialectic Tensions on Family Communication

The major implications of this study for the field of family communication center

on two themes: loyalty conflicts and uncertainty. Loyalty conflicts were one of the major

themes that appear to be driving the push and pull between dialectic tensions my

stepdaughter experienced. These loyalty conflicts influenced how my stepdaughter

experienced and responded to moments within our relationship and were a driving factor

within her negotiation of the *past-present* dialectic and *emotional closeness-distance*

dialectic. Baxter et al. (2004) noted that because of loyalty conflicts children will

intentionally distance themselves from their stepparent. Within this study, I observed that

my stepdaughter's desire for distance correlated with loyalty conflicts. It is noted in the

analysis above that when my stepdaughter perceived our relationship a threat to her

relationship with her biological mother, she would distance herself from me, often

abruptly. This supports the findings of Baxter (2009) that loyalty conflicts will be a

struggle for children as they see the new family as a threat to the memory of the old

family, and offers real-world examples of times when loyalty conflicts are triggered and

how they are managed by children in stepfamily relationships.

Furthermore, the description of my stepdaughter's experience with loyalty

conflicts and how they affect our relationship offers context for stepparents to understand

why their stepchildren may behave in certain ways. As my stepdaughter managed loyalty

conflicts, I often struggled to not take it personally. This struggle triggered the dialectics

of *emotional closeness-distance, autonomy-connection,* and *past-present*, which I

attempted to manage. I often perceived her management of *past-present* as a threat to my

identity as a parental figure in her life, resulting in moments where I would emotionally

distance myself from my stepdaughter, seek autonomy from my role as a stepparent, and

even contemplate whether or not my decision to become a parent through marriage was

the right one. My attempts to manage these various dialectic tensions may have in turn

triggered some of the dialectic tensions my stepdaughter experienced. Given that

interpersonal relationships are defined and re-defined through communicative processes

that manage the neutral, opposing forces found within relational dialectics, it seems likely

that how I manage particular tensions at particular points in time influences the dialectic

tensions my stepdaughter experiences. For example, when I distance myself as a result of

feeling inadequate as a stepparent, she may experience the dialectic of *present-future*

more intensely.

The second major theme from previous research that this study supports is the

high degree of uncertainty involved in the stepparent role. Previous studies note that

despite their spouses expecting them to take an active role in parenting, stepparents often

struggle with determining what that role means, and this uncertainty affects their ability

to create and maintain a satisfying relationship with their stepchild. This is a challenge

particularly faced by stepmothers (Ganong et al., 2011). Throughout each of the

dialectic tensions I experienced, a theme of uncertainty emerged. Because of this

uncertainty, I distanced myself from my stepdaughter at times, sought autonomy from my

role as a stepparent, and struggled with the boundaries of friend and parent. While I felt pressure to fulfill parenting roles, at the same time I felt that my role should follow the advice of clinicians and be more of a friend-like role. Although it has been noted in previous research that feelings of uncertainty are prominent for stepparents when it comes to their relationships with their stepchild, none of the research suggested coping mechanisms to stepparent and instead focused on how to build a relationship. The finding that uncertainty is a theme within the management of each dialectic tension I experienced as a stepparent is important for family communication scholars, as it provides additional insight into the specific ways stepparents experience uncertainty, and how that uncertainty affects the way they manage other components of the relationship. Further understanding of the ways in which uncertainty is experienced, and the impact of this uncertainty on building meaningful relationships (such as how this triggers stepparents to negotiate *autonomy-connection* or *past-present*) can help family scholars develop and test strategies for helping stepparents cope with and manage uncertainty. This in turn can lead to stepparents feeling less autonomy from their relational role and more connection to their role as a stepparent, which could result in increased relationship satisfaction, feeling more encouraged and less stress and depressive symptoms within their role, and ultimately more positivity towards their role as a stepparent.

Finally, in addition to providing additional evidence of existing research, and further enriching knowledge about previously discovered stepfamily challenges, this study influences family communication scholarship by providing an understanding of the stepparent experience. This study can be used by family communication specialists and clinicians to help stepparents contextualize their relationships with their stepchildren. By

using this study as a means to achieve or deepen understandings of the types of experiences found in step-relationships stepparents in particular can find similarities within their own relationships, which can help create a feeling of normalness through shared experience. As such, my experience as documented in my personal narrative combined with my retrospective analysis through this study can be used by family communication specialists to help stepparents identify and understand the dialectic tensions they may be managing, and potentially alter their own internal or external responses to these relational tensions to improve their own relationships.

In addition to having implications for the field of family communication, the findings from this study also has implications for individuals who are stepparents, or spouses of stepparents. The implications of this study for stepparents and spouses of stepparents are described in detail below.

Implications for Stepparents and Spouses of Stepparents

Both stepparents and their spouses can benefit from the information in this study by gaining understanding in this uncertain and complex experience. For stepparents, this study can be used to achieve a deeper understanding of their own experience, and to reduce uncertainty in their own relationship through the parallels they may find between my shared experience and their own. Shapiro and Stewart (2012) found that not only has stepparenting been linked with increased stress levels, but that stepparents are more likely to feel depressed. Sharing this experience with others may minimize some of the psychological affects that the challenges of stepparenting have on stepparents that Shapiro and Stewart (2012) note by helping stepparents note feel alone in their experience. This study can be used by other stepparents in order to contextualize their

own relationships and communicative events with their stepchildren through the dialectic tensions I experienced, and achieve a better understanding of how their efforts to manage these dialectic tensions or their reactions to behaviors like loyalty conflicts may be affecting their own relationships or relational satisfaction. This understanding gained through contextualization and shared experience may help other stepparents view and respond to communicative events and feelings they experience in a different way. Although stepparents and parents may experience similar dialectic tensions (which will be explored later in this discussion) the dialectic tensions stepparents experience are increasingly complicated due to factors lack a lack of unconditional love, resistance from children or adjusting to becoming a parent through marriage. For example, stepparents, particularly those who do not have any of their own children, may feel a sense of community knowing that emotional challenges they face around their role as a stepparent (*autonomy-connection)* and/or around their choice to gain children through marriage (*past-present)* are experiences other stepparents have too. Through this understanding, stepparents may be better equipped to approach their relationship with stepchildren more mindfully.

Additionally, stepparents who review this study can also achieve understanding into some of the dialectic tensions their stepchildren likely experience, which can also act to reduce uncertainty. For example, rather than seeing interactions with their stepchildren as acts of deviance, resistance or as being rejected, stepparents can understand the issues such as boundary testing and loyalty conflicts. This understanding can help stepparents normalize certain behaviors or events that may have been causing them to distance themselves from their relationship with their stepchildren or struggle to create a

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meaningful relationship with their stepchildren, ultimately feeling less reactive to certain events they experience. In doing so, stepparents can achieve a more satisfying relationship with their stepchildren. This same realization is also beneficial for biological parents who may feel frustrated by certain behaviors they perceive as deviance.

Finally, it is noted above that clinicians recommend a friendship first approach whereas spouses expect stepparents to fulfill parenting roles and responsibilities. This is another area in which uncertainty can arise as the friendship first recommendation conflicts with the expectations spouses have. Other stepparents may find my personal account useful in two ways. First, other stepparents who read my account may have critiques about the times I chose to exert authority versus act as a friend. Their critiques of my choices might inform their own future choices around friendship approaches versus discipline or authority approaches. Second, if other stepparents find my applications of friendship building and authority to be used appropriately, then my experience may help provide a frame of reference for managing the opposition between their spouse's expectations of fulfilling parenting roles and clinician recommendations about building a relationship with stepchildren through friendship tactics. Furthermore, it is my hope that spouses of stepparents also can recognize the contradictions between clinician recommendations and their own role expectations for their spouse. Doing so might encourage spouses of stepparents adjust their expectations about parenting roles initially, and to allow their spouses more time to transition into newfound parenting responsibilities.

The ability for this study to help stepparents feel less alone within their own step-relationship building efforts makes this study highly valuable for stepparents; however,

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spouse of stepparents (i.e. biological parents) also benefit from the findings herein.

Because this study is based on the personal narrative of a stepparent, experiencing the

challenges of stepparenting firsthand, spouses of stepparents can benefit from being privy

to this study in order to understand the experience of their spouse and the experience of

their children. For example, spouses of stepparents, particularly those stepparents who do

not have children of their own, may not understand the complex emotions and relational

tensions that their spouses are experiencing. While it may be natural for spouses to hope

that their partner and child will develop a parent-child like relationship, as this study

shows that can be difficult due to the various dialectic tensions managed simultaneously.

Spouses of stepparents may be unaware of the uncertainty their spouse is experiencing

within the role, or be unaware of how normal developing child behaviors, such as

boundary testing, may make their spouses feel inadequate or rejected. Spouses may be

also unaware of the impact their expectations of their spouse may be having on their

spouse's relational satisfaction. As noted within the dialectic of *past-present,* I found

myself feeling frustrated by the role expectations placed upon me, to the point where I

contemplated if my marriage was the right decision at points during my 10 month

account. Having these understandings might help spouses of stepparents better support

their partner as they attempt to define their role as a stepparent and find meaning within

the relationship with their stepchildren. Additionally, these understandings might help

spouses realize the impact that placing immediate role expectations on their spouse may

have on their psyche and marital satisfaction at given points. This realization may act to

help spouses place less immediate demands on their spouses or offer more time to

spouses for stepping into parenting roles, which can help stepparents adjust into the parenting role at a pace that may be more appropriate.

Likewise parents can also achieve a better understanding of the complex relational tensions their children are managing within their new stepfamily relationships. For example, awareness of the *past-present* dialectic's existence within the relationship can give parents a framework for understanding why their child may intentionally distance themselves from their stepparent. Rather than seeing this distancing as their child rejecting their spouse, parents can understand that this behavior is rooted in loyalty conflicts. This is helpful for not only the spouse of the stepparent, but also for the same sex biological parent, and can help both biological parents be better equipped to talk to and support their children through challenges they face with the shifting family dynamics.

Furthermore, the emergence of a *present-future* dialectic is also important given that remarried parents may chose expand their family with their new spouse. When a new child is introduced into the family, existing children within the family may be coping uncertainty and fear around what impact a new sibling will have on their existing relationships. Both biological parents, as well as stepparents, can use the awareness that children may be experiencing a negotiation between *past-present* in two ways. First, this negotiation may result in behavior issues therefore understanding that a past-present dialectic exists can help parents and stepparents contextualize any behavioral issues that may arise during family expansion. Second, even if behavior issues do not arise, parents and stepparents can use their awareness of this dialectic tension to increase or improve conversations on the topic of half-siblings to promote a healthy adjustment to the new

family even if the emotions associated with *past-present* negotiations are not outwardly expressed.

The understandings about experiences children face in new family structures gained from this study also informs understandings of children's family experiences in traditional family structures. These implications are described in detail below.

Implications for Traditional Family Structures

The final group that benefits from the findings of this study is parents or new parents in traditional family structures. Parents may be able to use the experiences accounted for by this study in order to contextualize their own interactions with their child in light of the dialectic tensions that stepparents experience. Although the tensions may manifest differently or be managed differently due to feelings of unconditional love or natural authority in the eyes of the child, stepparents and parents alike encounter very similar dialectic tensions, particularly around things like *parent-friend.* Like stepparents, biological parents also have to balance establishing an open, trusting relationship with their children with being an authoritative figure in their children's lives. Oftentimes parents who overly befriend their children are criticized. Although clinicians recommend that stepparents forge a friendship-like relationship with their stepchildren before asserting a lot of authority, as this study shows that any sort for befriending approaches must be balanced with authority when necessary. It is important for stepparents and parents alike to balance these tensions effectively in order to avoid being too strict and authoritative or not authoritative enough. Parents can leverage the findings from this study about how the *parent-friend* dialectic was managed and contextualize their own balancing efforts between these tensions.

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Additionally, the findings in this study around boundary testing can help parents are able to better understand and contextualize their interactions with their children. While it might be natural for a parent to assume that deviant behavior is a sign of rejection or a lack of respect, rather than understanding these actions as boundary testing. Having this understanding can help parents be less reactive to behavioral situations and recognize these as moments where their children are testing them. The experience that I had with boundary testing within this study can be particularly useful for new parents. Just as I had a hard time seeing certain behaviors, such as not listening to me or talking back, as boundary testing and normal behavior for a child her age, biological parents also likely experience the same types of situations. Thus, if parents are able to contextualize their own child's behavior as boundary testing, it might reduce frustration and normalize these types of behaviors.

Finally, the findings around *present-future* suggest that children, particularly only children, may experience a lot of fear and uncertainty around the idea of having siblings. Awareness of this dialectic can help parents who are introducing a sibling into a single child household become aware of these fears, giving them a context for understanding potential behavioral issues that might arise. Further research might investigate the dialectic of *present-future,* not only with a focus on introducing a second child into traditional families, but also with a focus on how this dialectic manifests for only children in stepfamilies who are going to have a half-sibling introduced. Future research might also consider how this dialectic is managed differently (if at all) between children in traditional family structures and children in stepfamilies.

Personal Reflections and Understandings

As noted in the method, many researchers who use autoethnography as a method do so because they seek to improve and better understand relationships (Ellis et al., 2010). While this study had several practical implications for family communication scholarship, clinicians, and other stepparents, the methodological choice of this study resulted in my achievement of a deeper understanding of my own experience. In the following paragraphs, I will describe how this study furthered my own personal understandings of my experience.

First, when I began doing research on stepfamilies and building healthy stepfamilies, I though many of the findings of previous scholars would not apply to my experience and my relationship given the factors I perceived as unique, such as my stepdaughter's very young age when I came into her life and the fact that her biological parents had been separated since she was one. I believed that because I had been a part of her life for so long, I did not think my stepdaughter would be experiencing and managing the dialectic of *past-present* or loyalty conflicts. I assumed she was well acclimated to the new family and never considered she could be experiencing a conflict between loyalty to her biological mother and her relationship with me. Analyzing our relationship and interactions using RDT helped me to understand how our relationship is influenced by loyalty conflicts, and the various affects of loyalty conflicts on our relationship.

The analysis also helped me to understand that simply labeling a stepparent-stepchild relationship as "good" or "bad" or according to a relational typology is not the most effective method for understanding this relational dynamic. Simply classifying does

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not tell us a whole lot about why some relationships are better or worse or what is occurring communicatively that acts to reshape and redefine relationships along the way. I am frequently asked by others if I have a "good relationship with my stepdaughter". I now adamantly believe this is an oversimplification and that the answer to this question is neither yes or no but rather that it is complex.

Additionally, this analysis helped me uncover the existence of a *present-future* dialectic. Through this discovery, I am more aware of the potential fears my stepdaughter may have surrounding the uncertainty of what may occur in the future. The *present-future* dialectic is particularly useful, not only for me but for my husband, as we talk about having children together and growing our family. By knowing this dialectic exists, we can be better prepared to handle conversations, conflicts, and even behavior issues that may arise when we do decide to have a child, which hopefully will help us be better equipped to help her adjust well when the time comes.

Finally, because autoethnography is self-critical, the use of this method and the choice to study my own relationship helped me to see opportunities for personal growth. There are times within the journal I kept in which my responses to certain events were immature, reactive or overly emotional. Moments that seemed like a huge deal, in retrospect, were really moments in which my stepdaughter was exhibiting normal behavior for a developing child or were moments in which I might have overreacted. Additionally, this study helped me to become more aware of my own *past-present* dialectic. While there are moments that I documented feeling unsure if I had been ready for being a parent or guilty because I had personal priorities I wanted to focus on, this study helped me to contextualize that and recognize that these feelings are okay and that I

am still adjusting to having gained a child through marriage before I was ready to have children of my own. Having this fresh perspective allows me to approach our relationship, particularly the challenges within it, with a less emotional perspective. It also empowers me to be less reactive, more understanding and ultimately more patient within my relationship with my stepdaughter and with myself as I continue to learn and adjust to the role of being a stepmom.

Limitations

This study may be limited because it is an examination of a single person's experience. Furthermore, this is the experience of a young stepmother in a situation where the biological parents were never married and have been separated since the child was one. Because of these factors, it is difficult to generalize the findings across the broader stepparent population. However, as Ellis and Bochner (2003) propose, an autoethnography is meaningful for the reader in the sense that "our lives are particular, but they also are typical and generalizable since we all participate in a limited number of cultures and institutions" (p. 751). Furthermore, Ellis and Bochner (2003) propose that with autoethnography, the generalizability of a story is "tested by readers as they determine if it speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know" (p. 751).

Areas for Future Research

Considering that much of the research surrounding managing dialectic tensions within step relationships has focused on the tensions that stepchildren manage, future research into stepparent experience using RDT as a framework for understanding should be conducted. As noted above, one limitation of this study is that the findings are based

on the experience of one stepparent. The study should be repeated using the accounts of multiple stepparents to determine if there are other dialectic tensions present that stepparents are managing, and achieve greater understanding of how stepparents manage dialectic tensions within their relationships with their stepchildren.

Another area worthy of future research is related to the dialectic of *past-present*. In particular, future research to understand how young children, specifically only children, who have been involved in stepfamily for many years perceive the idea of half siblings. Children in stepfamilies are already managing the dialectic of *past-present* with regard to their old family and the new stepfamily. Studies should investigate how the child manages the added layer of the *present-future* dialectic. In other words, how does the child experience and manage the tension between the old stepfamily structure and the new stepfamily structure in which the child is sharing their biological parent and stepparent. As noted above, future research might also consider analyzing children in stepfamilies and only children in traditional families to understand how, if at all, this dialectic is managed differently.

A final area worthy of future research is on the topic of stepparents who were once stepchildren. As noted in the analysis, I often feared being perceived as the "evil stepmom", and had this fear perpetuated by my own relationship as a teenager with my former stepdad. It would be interesting to investigate how stepparents who were once stepchildren themselves manifest and project their experience as a stepchild onto their own stepchildren, and the challenges that may arise from this.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

The relationship between a stepparent and stepchild is considered to be the most challenging and stressful out of all the relationships existing within a family (Schrodt, 2006). By using RDT as a framework for understanding, this study can inform and validate existing dialectic tensions, as well as identify new tensions present within this relationship that contribute to these challenges. These dialectic tensions support the findings of previous scholars regarding loyalty conflicts children experience, and the high degree of uncertainty stepparents experience. Although this study has implications for family communication scholarship, for parents and stepparents, and for myself in the dual role of researcher and participant, this study is limited by the fact that it can only account for the experience of one person. Future research should be conducted in the areas described above to further understand the dialectic tensions stepfamilies experience.

Chapter 10: Epilogue

It has been nine months since I stopped keeping my journal and began working on this study. Although I have not continued to document my experience with my stepdaughter, since I began my analysis of my journal about six months ago, I have found myself reacting differently to situations and approaching our relationship with a different vantage point. This analysis helped me to develop an understanding of my stepdaughter's experience, in addition to better understanding my own emotions, behaviors and reactions. My stepdaughter and I are closer than we have been in a long time. Our evenings have been spent with more laughter and less tears. She still tests my boundaries; however, I have found myself reacting less often and less emotionally to her tests. She and I have continued to find common interests, such as her recent enrollment in dance

classes and her increasing love for country music, and have enriched our bond based on these topics. While it is not always perfect, and never will be, our relationship has improved significantly since I began writing on August 11, 2013, and I feel much better equipped to manage the relationship moving forward. The awareness and understanding I have gained into topics like boundary testing, loyalty conflicts, my experience and my stepdaughter's experience have been invaluable.

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