

“I SET THE TONE”: THE ROLE OF BIOLOGICAL MOTHERS  
IN THE SUCCESSFUL FORMATION OF STEPFAMILIES

by

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B.A., Oklahoma Wesleyan University, 1978

M.S., Kansas State University, 1999

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

School of Family Studies and Human Services

College of Human Ecology

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Manhattan, Kansas

2009

## ABSTRACT

The focus of the present qualitative study was on the specific roles played by mothers in helping the members of their families adjust to each other and successfully transition into a family unit. Mothers play an important role in the lives of their children and their husbands as they form stepfamilies. Utilizing symbolic interaction and family systems theories, all of the members of two stepfamilies were interviewed. Using cross-case analysis, communication, adaptability/flexibility, positive identity and positive perspective were identified as familial attributes leading to their success as families. Mothers were identified by their husbands and their children as playing essential, pivotal roles in the facilitation of the formation and sustenance of the stepfather/stepchild relationship. Implications of these findings are discussed, along with the contributions of this study to the literature and insights and implications for researchers as well as professionals working with stepfamilies.

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Approved by:

Major Professor

Karen S. Myers-Bowman

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Tess, a middle-aged mother of two, was about to get remarried, and was the happiest she has been since her husband died three years before. However, her happiness was challenged and somewhat diminished by her children who missed their father. This was particularly true of her teenage daughter Anna, who still grieved her father's loss, and could not understand how her mother could remarry so quickly. Anna expressed her frustration and displeasure in a constant stream of angry words and contrary behaviors. The man (Ryan) who was about to become the stepfather seemed impervious to Anna's disapproval, seemingly oblivious to her concerns and unwillingness to accept him.

Through an improbable series of events, Tess and Anna awakened one morning to find they had traded bodies, and the ensuing mayhem resulted in their gaining insight and understanding into the struggles of the other. When Tess asked Anna, "What is it about Ryan that you don't like?" Anna snapped, "He's fine". With growing insight, Tess replied, "But I know he's not your father."

By the eve of the wedding, Tess had come to understand Anna's feelings, and admitted to Anna that in her own search for happiness, she had lost sight of where her children were in the healing process. She was willing to postpone the marriage in the hope that Anna and her brother would come to a point of being able to be happy with her, and accept Ryan into the family. The climax of the Disney film, "Freaky Friday" occurs when Anna, still in her mother's body and striving to speak on her behalf, addressed the guests assembled at the wedding rehearsal:

*Three years ago, we had a really bad thing happen in our family. We lost a husband and a father and I didn't think we'd ever be able to get over it. But then (Ryan) came into the picture, and everybody could see I was happy again. But I was still really worried about my two kids – whether*

*they would be able to accept a new man in their life. And now I know what Anna feels, and what she feels is that, no one could ever take the place of her dad, because he was a really great dad. But somebody could be a part of a new family, it's own kind of cool, new little unit. That for someone as special as Ryan we could all just make a little room. Ryan, welcome to our family.*

In the movie, insight and empathy took only twelve hours (and included the unlikely event of two people trading bodies), but in millions of families across the United States, such understanding and empathy must grow over time. Children and adolescents facing the addition of stepfathers into their families will take time to make adjustments and find acceptance. Mothers, and the men they are about to marry, hope that one day their children will be able to say, “We can be part of a new family unit. We can make a little room. (Insert name here), welcome to our family.”

#### American Stepfamily Realities

In a society in which approximately 50% of first marriages and 60% of second marriages end in divorce, and an uncounted but rapidly growing number of people cohabit outside of marriage for periods of time, an estimated 35% of children will be part of stepfamilies before age 18 (Amato, 2001; Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Ganong & Coleman, 2000). With the relatively high divorce rate in second and higher order (subsequent) marriages, many children will need to make the transition into new family configurations two or more times.

Divorce and discontinuous relationships are rarely easy for anyone, but are considered especially challenging for the children involved, because they usually have little or no voice in the decisions made, and they face a series of transitions and adjustments in nearly every aspect of their lives. Depending on children’s ages and other characteristics, they may have little understanding of what is happening to them as they strive to negotiate a variety of mental,

emotional, and often physical adjustments (i.e. new living arrangements) (Amato, 2004; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1996). This increased need for support comes at a time when their parents may be emotionally stressed, depressed, financially challenged, and/or physically distant. While children tend to be resilient and their parents' separation or divorce may be in the best interests of everyone for the long term, it is nonetheless a process which can potentially tax the resources of all involved (Booth & Amato, 2001).

Although second (and higher order) marriages have an even greater likelihood of ending in divorce than first marriages (Amato, 2001; Cherlin, 1992), most people do remarry, with one out of six adults going through two or more divorces (Amato, 2001). This search for the right partner in the attempt to create a successful marriage has been described as serial monogamy (Cox & Desforges, 1987, p. 68), "serial marriage" (Amato, 2001, p. 1269), or "serial remarriage" (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000, p. 1289). As a result, children face the very real possibility of going through not one but a series of adjustments during their growing up years (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994).

In a comprehensive meta-analysis of stepfamily research conducted in the 1990's, Amato (2001) and Coleman et al. (2000) noted that a large number of studies found that on a variety of measures, including success in school, psychological adjustment, social competence, and even long term physical health, children with divorced parents have lower scores than do children residing with continuously married parents (Amato, 2001). Amato further observed that several longitudinal studies (Amato & Booth, 1996; Asseltine, 1996; Cherlin, 1991; Doherty & Needle, 1991; Hetherington, 1999) found that these differences were often present as early as 8-12 years before the parents divorced, especially in boys. This indicates that some of the often presumed negative effects of divorce on children were already present for years before the parental

marriage dissolved. This illustrates one of the myriad challenges confronting researchers attempting to gain greater understanding of the dynamics of divorce, remarriage, and stepfamily formation.

The process of separation, divorce, and subsequent life changes can be a source of stress for those involved. Hill (1949) theorized that life stressors can have a cumulative effect, and various researchers have found this to be the case with divorce (Amato, 2001). While a specific divorce and remarriage may be perceived as positive by both the parent and child, additional related changes can have negative effects. Capaldi and Patterson (1991) suggested that the more “marital disruptions experienced by a parent, the more internalizing and externalizing problems children exhibit as a result of having to cope with these multiple transitions” (p. 490).

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate successful stepfamilies in an attempt to better understand the factors leading to their success. With the majority of second marriages ending in divorce, it is important to determine what characteristics enable some stepfamilies to not only remain together but actually describe themselves as successful? What helps stepfathers and their stepchildren develop positive relationships with each other, especially when the biological father is still involved in his children’s lives? With the limited amount of research regarding mothers in stepfamilies, we also need to better understand what the role of mothers is in helping their families become successful. Maternal gatekeeping has been studied in intact, nuclear families but has had minimal study within the stepfamily context. This study will provide insight into the presence and role of maternal gatekeeping in successful stepfamilies. As a result of this study, stepfamilies will have increased insight into factors that can lead to greater ease of transition and contribute to the success of their relationship. Researchers will have additional data for

consideration and new insights for further research. Finally, family life educators and family professionals will find suggestions for working with those in the process of forming stepfamilies.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is an initial step in a quest to help stepfamilies make successful transitions and adjustments to stepfamily living. The literature review begins by noting some fundamental challenges addressed in stepfamily research. One of those challenges is finding consistent, meaningful, carefully defined words and terms that allow researchers to accurately describe the various phenomena with which they are involved. The study of stepfamilies has been approached from many theoretical perspectives (Amato, 2001; Stewart, 2007), so a brief introduction will be given to some of those most commonly used by researchers. Then literature regarding factors that affect the role and adjustments of stepfathers and their stepchildren will be highlighted. Finally, research regarding the roles of biological mothers will be examined, including their roles post-divorce in relation to parenting their children and factors relating to mothers' adjustment during that period of time. Then the literature regarding the role of mothers as gatekeepers in nuclear families will be highlighted. Maternal gatekeeping has been explored within the context of biological, intact families, but has not yet been researched within stepfamilies and holds potential as being an important element in stepfamily formation and adjustment.

While most stepfamily research has been conducted within the last 50 years, stepfamilies have existed in one form or another throughout human existence. Historically, with limited medical care, complications in pregnancy and childbirth, and considerably shorter life spans than today, most stepfamilies were formed after the death of a parent, and the subsequent remarriage of the surviving parent. (Hence the usage of the prefix "step" which originally meant to "deprive" or "bereave", referring to orphans (Cherlin, 1978).) As late as the 1920's in the United States, census data indicated that more individuals remarried after losing a spouse to death as after divorcing (Cherlin, 1978).

Within the last century, life expectancy in the United States has lengthened and legal divorces have become more easily obtainable and socially acceptable, with the result that the majority of stepfamilies are no longer formed from the death of a parent, but from the divorce of the couple (Cherlin, 1978). “Of all the changes in family life during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps the most dramatic – and the most far-reaching in its implications – was the increase in the rate of divorce” (Amato, 2001, p. 1269).

Regardless of whether a stepfamily is formed through the death of a spouse or the choice to end a previous relationship, a near consensus exists in the stepfamily literature that most stepfamilies are born out of some form of grief and loss (Visher & Visher, 2001). To varying degrees, those involved in divorcing families need to cope with and process the loss of a relationship, as well as the loss of dreams or expectations of a “happy intact family”. Children in divorcing families have reduced contact with at least one if not both parents because, even in joint residential custody, children can live with only one parent at a time. Children also may face relocation to a new home, making new friends, and other emotional adjustments.

With the relatively high rate of divorce and the number of people cohabitating without marrying, the number of persons involved in stepfamily situations is growing (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Stewart, 2007). It is estimated that approximately 25% of children live in cohabiting stepfamilies, and that 40% of children who will come into a stepfamily will do so as a result of their parents’ cohabitation rather than remarriage (Stewart, 2007). The complex relationships that can result from parents divorcing and remarrying have led some to assert that this may be the most complex of family relationships (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2000).

While in the United States divorce statistics have held steady or declined slightly over the past 20 years, it is estimated that approximately 50% of marriages end in divorce, and over half of new marriages are actually remarriages for at least one of the partners (Ahrons, 2004; Amato, 2001). By age 16, approximately 40% of white children and 75% of African-American children will experience the divorce of their parents (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). One in three children will live in a stepfamily for at least some portion of their lives, many in more than one (Amato, 2001; Stewart, 2007). These statistics do not include the number of women who have had a child prior to marriage or have been in a significant cohabitational relationship without marrying, but certainly the actual number of stepfamilies would be much greater if statistics were available for these families (Phillips, 1997; Stewart, 2007).

Approximately 75% of those divorcing for the first time will ultimately remarry (Coleman et al., 2000), while others will cohabit for periods of time (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Remarriages tend to happen rather rapidly (especially for men), with the average time between divorce and remarriage typically at less than four years, with 30% remarrying within one year of divorce (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000).

In his seminal article on stepfamilies in society, Cherlin (1978) asserted that the stepfamily is an “incomplete institution” because of the lack of appropriate words to denote new relationships, and because legal structures, support and social customs are clearly inadequate and often are unsupportive of stepfamilies. For example, stepfathers have no legal custody of, nor authority to make decisions for, their minor stepchildren. Few societal structures exist which provide targeted support for new stepfamilies, and social customs within most cultures reflect the paradigm of intact, nuclear families. Cherlin (1978) noted that those social structures and customs assist those forming families, who find it easier to function and adjust to the realities of

life when many of their roles and responsibilities have become “habitualized” or “routinized” (p. 636). However, “nowhere in contemporary family life is the psychological gain from habitualization more evident than in the families of remarried spouses and their children, where, paradoxically, habitualized behavior is often absent” (Cherlin, 1978, p. 636).

In other words, stress is minimized when family members each know their roles and have comfortably adapted to the routines and expectations of the family system. In an intact, nuclear family the couple establishes these patterns over time, and children grow up within those patterns. However, in a newly formed stepfamily, previous patterns, routines, and expectations may be disrupted or modified, new ones formed, and stress levels may be higher for all members of the family until they become habitualized or comfortable with the new roles, systems and routines of family life.

Despite the publication of numerous articles and books over the years, researchers, clinicians, and family practitioners still face many of the same issues as the early pioneers in the field (Coleman et al., 2000). Some of those issues include understanding how divorce affects children of various ages, why children of divorce are more likely themselves to be divorced one day, the formation and implementation of the role of stepfathers, and what factors lead to successful transitions into new marital relationships (Amato, 2000). Stepparent roles remain largely undefined, since the norm of a biological family prevails in the mindset of most people (Gamache, 1997; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Because second and higher order marriages have an even higher rate of divorce than first marriages (Amato, 2001), increasing numbers of people are involved in an ongoing series of relationships, with the potential for adverse effects upon those involved, particularly the children.

In summary, the stepfamily is an increasingly common family form, yet in many ways each stepfamily is confronted with pioneering its own way forward. The challenges each family confronts are not only from within their own family system, but also from society at large. While some progress has been made within society and the field of family studies toward the normalization and institutionalization of the stepfamily since Cherlin published his article, it is clear that stepfamilies within American society await further definition, normalization, and resolution.

### Terms and Definitions

An issue confronting stepfamilies in the United States is the lack of terms that could help normalize and destigmatize stepfamilies (Jones, 2003). As recently as 2004, Ahrons decried the lack of “kinship language” to appropriately recognize old and new family relationships without “making children feel that their identity is shattered by divorce” (p. 531), i.e. utilization of terms such as broken family.

Words are powerful tools, and have the potential to either contribute to greater understanding in research and society at large, or create obstacles for researchers and generate negativity for stepfamilies (Ganong, Coleman, & Kennedy, 1990; Jones, 2003). To facilitate increased stepfamily success it is essential that researchers and family professional develop a standardized vocabulary regarding the terms and their definitions used in describing and researching stepfamilies. Various researchers have addressed this lack of appropriate and consistent terminology (Bray, 1998; Coleman, Ganong, & Mapes, 1990; Jones, 2003; Visher & Visher, 1996), but terms are still used in different ways, leading to confusion rather than clarity in reading and understanding the literature.

For example, Bray and colleagues (1994) used the term “blended family” to describe stepfamilies in which biological children of both partners have primary residence with the couple, and state that “there is no term designating stepfamilies with children from the current marriage” (p. 71). However, Halpern-Meehin and Tach (2008) defined blended families as those formed when the “parents in a stepfamily give birth to a shared child, so that they contain both stepchildren and shared children” (p. 435). Obviously, their inclusion of half-siblings in this definition changes the meaning considerably from its previous usage.

Halpern-Meehin and Tach (2008) confused the issues even more by noting that, “Stepchildren in blended families are usually classified as residing in stepfamilies, even though they have half-siblings” (p. 435), whereas the term “blended stepfamily” has been used for some time as a specific family type (Bray, et al, 1994). While some researchers have used different definitions of the same terms, others have not offered definitions of their terms, assuming the reader shares their understanding of the term. Stepfamilies can be structurally and relationally complex, and stepfamily researchers would benefit the field greatly by consistently using established and agreed upon terms. If family professionals cannot agree on appropriate names and terms, it is not surprising that society at large has yet to normalize the family forms of those who remarry (Jones, 2003).

Various terms are commonly used to describe the new family including, but not limited to, “blended family” (Bray, et al., 1994), “remarried family,” “restructured family,” “reconstituted family” (Stewart, 2007) and “binuclear family” (McGoldrick & Carter, 1989; Coleman et al., 2000). Although the prefix “step” can have etymologically negative connotations (Jones, 2003; Bray, 1998), Stepfamily Association of America founders John and Emily Visser asserted that the term “stepfamily” is generally preferred over other possibilities such as blended

family (1997), and certainly stepfamily is the term most commonly used and accepted within the body of research literature.

Due to the lack of normalization and standardization of stepfamily terms and their definitions, it is important to define terms used within this study in order to facilitate accuracy, clarity, and consistency. To minimize assumptions or lack of clarity, various terms used throughout this document are defined below:

The most common term used in the literature is “stepfamily,” which was cogently defined by Anderson and Sabatelli (1999) as “a family in which one or both spouses bring children into the remarriage, resulting in the presence of both biological and nonbiological parents” (p. 320). This definition would more accurately reflect current realities in our society if the word “relationship” was substituted for the word “remarriage,” since more cohabiting couples (48%) enter new unions with children from previous relationships than do remarried couples (37%) (Coleman et al., 2000). In addition, this definition would be enhanced if it addressed adoption or guardianship instead of just biological offspring of the parents.

As previously noted, one of the challenges in studying stepfamily literature is that there are various types or configurations of stepfamilies. Participants in a study may represent stepfamilies varying in complexity. Since the common element of stepfamilies is the cohabiting or married couple, the presence of biological children from one or both parties serves as the determinant as to how researchers label the structure of the stepfamily. Bray, Berger and Boethel (1994) defined a “simple stepfamily” as one in which the stepparent has “no children from a previous relationship” (p. 71). If the stepparent does have children from a previous relationship, but those children do not have primary residence in the stepparent’s home, then the stepfamily is considered complex (Dunn, 2004). For this study, “blended family” will be used to describe

stepfamilies in which biological children of both partners have primary residence with the couple (Bray et al., 1994).

Because this research project is designed to gain greater understanding of the factors contributing to stepfamily success, the term “stepfamily success” needs to be operationalized. The word “success” is difficult to accurately define or quantify in human relationships, and certainly “successful stepfamily” compounds that challenge. For this study, Everett’s (1998) definition of “successful stepfamilies” as “those who have faced the challenges and dealt with them effectively so that the majority of household members are somewhat satisfied with their new family constellation” (p. 25) will be utilized.

From the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism, White and Klein (2002) defined a “role” as the “normative expectations attached to a specific position in a social structure” (p. 69). Fine, Coleman and Ganong (1999) used stepparent role to refer to “the set of cognitions and resulting behaviors pertaining to how stepparents should and do act towards their stepchildren” (p. 274). They further defined societal role clarity as “social consensus on what is appropriate behavior for stepparents,” and individual role clarity as a person’s (whether stepparent, parent, or stepchild) experience of certainty about how the stepparent should behave” (p. 274).

In this study, the phrase “intact, nuclear family” is used in reference to a married couple and children produced within that relationship. This is used for the sake of clarity to distinguish between a married couple with children born or adopted into that relationship and a stepfamily in which one of the couple does not share legal or biological parentage with the children of his/her spouse.

Agreement on terms and their definitions is beneficial for researchers and family professionals working with stepfamilies as well as for society at large. Just as words and their meanings have the power to change ideas and perceptions (Jones, 2003) so do the lenses through which people look at stepfamilies. As researchers develop, conduct, and report their research, it is vital that they acknowledge the theoretical lenses through which they observed their stepfamily participants. In the next section I will examine some of the more common theories utilized by stepfamily researchers.

### Theoretical Perspectives

In striving to understand and evaluate stepfamily literature, it is important to be aware of the lenses through which researchers view stepfamilies. Since “theory precedes observation, and there are no facts without theories” (Boss, Doherty, LaRossa, Schumm, & Steinmetz, 1993, p. 5), the theoretical perspectives, or lenses, used by researchers affect the design of a study, selection of sample participants, and analysis. As White and Klein (2002) noted, research data can be “organized in different ways, and different theories can be used to make sense of the same set of facts” (p. 1). Family theory authors Boss and colleagues (1993) defined theory as “a set of interconnected ideas” that result from the process of “theorizing” which is “systematically formulating and organizing ideas to understand a particular phenomenon” (p. 20). In their decadal meta-analysis of the literature, Coleman and colleagues (2000) noted that there was a growing trend for stepfamily researchers to overtly identify their “conceptual framework” compared with the previous decade.

However, Stewart (2007) argued that most researchers are not using family theories in the strict sense of that definition. Stewart observed that most family scientists are using “theoretical tools: concepts, hypotheses, approaches, perspectives, and frameworks for explaining stepfamily

life” (p. 25), rather than actual family theories. This lack of clarity on the part of such researchers not only impacts their presuppositions, methodology and interpretation of results, it also makes it more difficult for the reader to understand why they did what they did, and then to compare and contrast that with other studies.

Whether or not they overtly acknowledge it, and many do not, researchers have utilized a wide variety of theoretical perspectives to better understand stepfamily dynamics (Amato, 2001; Coleman et al., 2000; Stewart, 2007). A partial listing of the more common theories found in the literature include attachment theory, family systems theory, gender/feminist theory, human ecology theory (most commonly Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model), life course perspective, social exchange theory, social learning theory, social role theory, and symbolic interaction theory (Amato, 2001; Coleman, et al. 2000). While each has its strengths and can provide beneficial insights, three predominant formal theories and three observable perspectives must be examined in some detail to fully understand and appreciate the approaches of many researchers, as well as the challenges faced by those who attempt to gain a better understanding of what leads to successful stepfamily adjustment.

### *Social Learning Theory*

Social learning theory (SLT) underlies much stepfamily research, even though it is rarely stated explicitly. Many researchers target the processes through which various members of the stepfamily learn their behaviors within the new stepfamily construct. SLT unites “social psychology, cognitive development, and behaviorism” (Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, 1993, p. 536). Social learning theory is built upon behaviorism and Watson’s assertion that the only real form of study of human thought is observable behavior, and his assumption that behavior is learned (Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis).

There are two core assumptions in SLT that are particularly relevant to stepfamilies. The first assumption is that all human behavior is learned behavior, and that people can learn by observing the behaviors of others (Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, 1993). Throughout their lives, people strive to meet their needs by constantly seeking, filtering, and acting upon information gained from their interactions with others. Actions and behaviors that are perceived as pleasant or somehow rewarded are thus positively reinforced and individuals adopt the new behavior or make appropriate behavioral changes. Negative reinforcement or unpleasant experiences resulting from other behaviors will generally result in the individual either avoiding those social environments or modifying the costly behavior.

The second core assumption in SLT is that family members can influence each other. In particular, behaviors modeled by one member of a family can influence another family member to learn a new behavioral pattern or modify an existing one (Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, 1993; Ormond, 1999). Learning a behavior happens to the extent that the individual expects or receives positive reinforcement (i.e. words of affirmation) or avoids punishment.

Social Learning Theory focuses on the interpersonal factors and processes within families and their environments that teach or influence other family members to act or behave in a desired manner. For example, a researcher utilizing SLT in examining stepfamilies and how they integrate stepfathers is interested in the behaviors of the various family members and how they learned their roles (Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, 1993), as well as how stepfathers learn their roles within the context or environment of familial and societal expectations (Fine et al., 1999).

One of the strengths of social learning theory is its emphasis on the processes that lead an individual or family to behave in a certain manner (Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, 1993). Assuming that family members have an impact on each other in terms of roles and actions and interactions,

SLT takes a descriptive, rather than a prescriptive, approach to what is happening within a marriage or family rather than attempting to prescribe what should be (Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis). Through scrutinizing and analyzing family behaviors, Crosbie-Burnett and Lewis suggest that SLT attempts to provide answers to such questions as “How is the behavior or pattern of behaviors within or between individual family members acquired and maintained?” “How are family roles acquired?” and specifically relevant to the incorporation of a new stepfather into the family, “How do families train individuals to be well-adjusted or maladjusted?” (p. 541).

This theory is particularly useful in examining stepfamilies because it facilitates analysis of how family members’ behaviors have developed and affected each other, as well as the members impacting the family unit as a whole. A second aspect is that of attribution with regard to how individuals within the family attribute positive and/or negative behaviors to another individual, particularly between couples, but also between a stepparent and a stepchild, for example. In studying stepfamily adjustment, this concept can increase understanding as to how attitudes toward new stepfamily members may develop (Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, 1993).

This theory had its primary development within the field of psychology, and its emphasis on an individual’s learned observable behavior can be a real limitation, particularly within stepfamily research (Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, 1993). Another limitation is that SLT asserts that behavior is consciously learned from others, whereas most would agree that exchanges of information and attitudes between individuals are often subtle, even intuitive, exchanges of attitude or information, and one may make appropriate adaptations without being consciously aware of doing so. A third aspect of SLT which limits its effectiveness in studying stepfamilies is

lack of acknowledgement of the influence of human or family developmental stages in behavior and role formation (Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis).

With its origins in behaviorism, SLT is useful in attempting to understand how stepfathers will learn their roles from observing others and attempting to reproduce that behavior. However, since many stepfathers have no other stepfather role models, they may model their behaviors after biological fathers, with results that will be examined later. Another theory sharing similar origins in the field of social psychology is symbolic interaction theory, which looks not so much at the behavior of stepfathers, but rather the interactions between stepfathers and significant others in their lives which help give meaning to their new roles.

### *Symbolic Interaction Theory*

While both SLT and symbolic interaction theory (SIT) have the individual's role as a core concept, SIT focuses more on the *meaning* of the role to the individual. White and Klein (2002) noted that, more than any other family theory, symbolic interactionism "calls for paying attention to how events and things are interpreted by social actors" (p. 59). Because a large proportion of stepfamily literature attempts to observe and analyze the actions and reactions of the stepparents and stepchildren as they establish a family unit, this theory is especially useful.

An important element of SIT known as the Thomas Theorem, states that "what humans define as real has real consequences" (White & Klein, 2002, p. 60). This theorem provides a valuable glimpse into human relationships and how two people can share the same experience and yet have two very different interpretations, not only of the events that happened, but also the reason for or meaning of those events. For example, a child may perceive her stepfather as someone who is trying to replace her biological father or as someone who is trying to steal away her mother's time and attention. Whether or not her perception is shared by anyone else, or is

even a subconscious element of her stepfather's thinking, because her perceptions are real to her, her actions and reactions will reflect those perceptions. With the clear applicability of this theorem to stepfamily members, it is surprising that so few studies have attempted to delve into the attitudes and perceptions of stepchildren themselves (Koerner, Rankin, Kenyon & Korn, 2004).

Three core propositions of SIT are especially relevant to the successful integration of a new parent into a family:

1. The quality of ego's role enactment in a relationship positively affects ego's satisfaction with the relationship;
2. The greater the perceived clarity of role expectations, the higher the quality of role enactment;
3. The more individuals perceive consensus in the expectations about a role they occupy, the less their role strain (Burr, Leigh, Day, & Constantine, 1979, cited in White & Klein, 2002, pp. 68-69).

In other words, the more clearly the stepfather perceives agreement or consensus from his new wife and/or her children about his new roles as husband/stepfather, the less role strain he is likely to experience. Conversely, if he is receiving widely divergent messages about his roles (e.g. his new wife wants him to be a tough disciplinarian on her wayward teen, and the teen strongly resents anyone new disciplining him), then he will likely experience higher levels of internal confusion and role strain. It is therefore unlikely that he will succeed in making anyone happy or satisfied with the relationship.

However, if there is relative consensus and those role expectations are clearly communicated, stepfathers are much more likely to enact his role(s) with greater self-confidence

and the job they will do of husbanding/stepparenting will be better than they would have had their been a lack of consensus or clarity. The more they sense that they are meeting expectations and performing their roles adequately, the more likely it is that they will feel good about their roles. SIT predicts this will increase his satisfaction with the relationship(s) overall. The converse also can be true, in which new stepfathers enter into relationships about which they are uncertain of roles or expectations, feel that they are caught in the middle and unsure of how to proceed, and the resulting increased stress and role strain can increase their dissatisfaction with their relationships.

These propositions can help researchers gain valuable insight into the world of stepfamilies as stepfathers attempt to define, shape, and perform their roles. Family members' satisfaction with the marital/parental relationships is enhanced as their understanding of their role expectations becomes greater, and as they receive positive feedback from others in the family unit. Symbolic interaction theory helps the researcher look beyond the outcomes or behaviors of the stepfamily, and instead leads to insights into some of the reasons for those outcomes.

Whereas social learning theory primarily relates to the role learning of stepfathers, symbolic interaction theory looks at the interaction of biological mothers and their husbands and how that impacts meaning and role taking of their roles as stepfathers. A third family theory enhances our understanding of stepfathers in relation to those within his closest social sphere, or system, their new families.

### *Family Systems Theory*

Many researchers approach stepfamilies from a family systems theoretical perspective, in which one focuses on the way individuals function as parts of a system or integrated whole. Originally adapted from the field of communication, general systems theory began to be applied

to families following World War II, and is one of the newest family theories (White & Klein, 2002). In essence, Family Systems Theory (FST) sees families as interdependent associations of interacting individuals. There are several core assumptions and concepts within this theory that must be understood to fully appreciate how this theory can help make sense of the complex realities of modern stepfamilies.

Underlying FST are four basic assumptions:

1. System elements are interconnected;
2. Systems can only be understood as wholes;
3. All systems affect themselves through environmental feedback; and
4. Systems are not reality (White & Klein, 2002, p. 124).

Built upon those assumptions are five core concepts presented by White and Klein (2002) that need to be understood for the purposes of this study:

1. System – a system is something that is separate from its environment but has an effect upon its environment.

2. Boundaries – the boundary of a system is its border with its environment. Some borders are more open and willing to include others from the environment in the system, other borders are more rigid and exclusive;

3. Variety – systems exist within environments which are changing, and variety means that a system has the resources and ability to adapt to those changes. A system with minimal variety may lack the resources or variety to successfully adapt to changes in its environment.

4. Equilibrium – family systems strive to maintain a sense of internal balance, which is referred to as homeostasis. When confronted with a change to the system, a family system will

use positive feedback to enhance the change or negative feedback to reduce the change and maintain stability;

5. Subsystems – systems may contain individuals or elements that can be identified and analyzed as smaller groupings of the whole, or subsystems. In a family in which there is a married couple and one child, the husband and wife would be a subsystem, the father and child would be a separate subsystem, and the mother and child would comprise yet a third subsystem, each with its own patterns of action and interaction (White and Klein, 2002).

In essence, in FST the individual is not considered apart from context, but rather as a person who is part of a family system, with each member interacting with and impacting the others. Family systems are composed of various member groupings called subsystems, with each subsystem possessing boundaries that define who is included as well as who is not. While family systems tend to resist change to maintain a sense of balance and continuity, change in one element can affect change within the others in the family system. When a divorce occurs, the various familial systems and subsystems are altered, often creating a binuclear family configuration. New boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are formed, and this becomes quite complex when one parent (or both parents) remarries and forms a stepfamily (Ahrns & Wallisch, 1987; Hetherington, 2006).

Another important aspect of FST is its emphasis on the system as operational and functional for its members, regardless of how it may appear to outsiders, and that each system is unique and dynamic. No two families or stepfamilies will be configured or function exactly the same way, and what might be considered dysfunctional to some might be perceived by those within the system as effectively meeting their needs. Patterns of interaction, family history and celebrations, rules and roles, are all integral elements of family life, and serve as illustrations of

the propensity for family systems to remain steady and largely unchanging. The interjection of a new person into the system will inevitably impact those elements, and forcing the family system into a process of reorganization (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993).

This process of reorganization brings about another core concept of FST, which is that systems are resistant to change. This propensity toward stability and maintenance of the status quo, including resistance to the attempt of new persons to enter the system, is called homeostasis (Boss et al., 1993). The longer a system has been intact with the same members included and largely the same functions for those members, the stronger will be its resistance toward change. A mother and her children who, following divorce, learn to bond and relate to each other in new, and perhaps emotionally more dependent ways, may develop a system with rather rigid boundaries. This is an especially critical element in trying to understand children's initial reactions to and acceptance of a stepfather. It also may give added insight into how the mother may serve as a catalyst in the inclusion or exclusion of the new person attempting to gain entrance and acceptance into the system (Hetherington, 2006). Since a change in one element of the system can effect change in the other elements of the system (White & Klein, 2002), the biological mother may be able to exert enough influence upon her children to make the necessary adaptations to include her new partner into their family system. Conversely, if the mother conveys ambivalence about her new partner or is overly critical of him in front of the children, they may be strongly disinclined to accept him into their family system.

#### Deficit Perspectives Used in Stepfamily Research

As has been shown, stepfamilies have been examined through a variety of lenses: Social Learning Theory, Symbolic Interaction Theory, and Family Systems Theory. However, as illustrated by Stewart (2007), many stepfamily researchers have approached their research with

what appear to be additional assumptions or perspectives that potentially impacted their methodologies and conclusions. While these perspectives are described in various ways, they share a common assumption and approach that stepfamilies are less than optimal. These deficit perspectives must be identified and examined in order to understand the methodologies and results found in some stepfamily research.

### *The Normal Family Perspective*

The first broad, but often unacknowledged, assumption by many stepfamily researchers is that the biological, nuclear, intact family is the normal family form, and that any other family configuration is defined by comparing and contrasting it to the normal family form. Thus is it ironic, but probably inevitable, that the dominance of the intact nuclear family model has become an obstacle to successful stepfamily formation (Bray, 1994; Gamache, 1997). The traditional roles and responsibilities held within the intact family, especially the core assumption that stepparents are to be like biological parents, are often expected by the new couple, as well as those around them (Coontz, 1992; Gamache). As a result, stepfathers' function and effectiveness in their roles within new stepfamilies is compared and contrasted to their counterparts in intact families. However depending on the family configuration and expectations this can actually be counterproductive, causing undue stress on stepfamilies, which feel that they are somehow not measuring up to the standard of the intact family.

### *Family Stress Perspective*

Those approaching the study of stepfamilies from the Family Stress Perspective view divorce, stepfamily formation, and adjustment as inherently very stressful. Two differing perspectives are used in the literature, especially in relation to the effects of divorce and remarriage on women and their children. One is the chronic stress perspective, which sees

divorce as such a significantly negative event that those individuals affected by it may spend a lengthy period of time in recovery (Amato, 2001). The other is a perspective developed by Amato (2001) called the “Divorce-Stress-Adjustment” perspective, which is based on the family development theory (cf. Hill, 1971, Boss, 1988). While acknowledging the stressors (mediators) that may accompany divorce, it also emphasizes various protective factors or moderators that can serve to help individuals make it through those transitions successfully. Amato’s model encapsulates the approach taken by some researchers that divorce can be stressful, but that it can also have positive results and benefits over time.

### *The Deficit Perspective*

The Normal Family Assumption and Stress Perspectives are really only aspects of the most dominant and inclusive assumption in the field of family studies research, which is the Deficit Perspective. While family science has historically moved from a problem-centered focus into an era in which family strengths are emphasized (Arcus, Schvaneveldt, & Moss, 1993), this is often not the case in stepfamily research. Most stepfamily research has utilized a “deficit-comparison approach” (Bray, 1994; Brenner & Hyde, 2006; Coleman et al., 2000; Stewart, 2007), which means that researchers often approach stepfamilies with the presupposition that the stepfamily is an inherently problematic family form. This is evidenced by researchers comparing and contrasting stepfamilies with biological, intact families (e.g., Zill, 1994). In nearly every study in which such comparisons are made, the stepfamily is found to be less effective, more problem ridden, and to have less healthy outcomes for those involved (Amato, 2001; Michaels, 2006). This tendency to target divorce and remarriage as a major source of personal problems, especially for children, is found throughout much of the literature.

Children and their parents are commonly referred to as coming from “broken” families, with the negative, detrimental and enduring impact that can have on the self-esteem and growing identity awareness of a child (Ahrons, 2004). Biological parents may be referred to as “natural” parents, with the implication that the stepparent is somehow “unnatural” (Ganong, Coleman, & Kennedy, 1990).

Whether spoken or unspoken, there is an almost inherent stigma attached to being part of a divorced family or stepfamily. In popular literature and spoken vernacular, the term stepchild is used as a referent for someone or something that is treated as less than, lacking, or uncared for (Bray, 1994). “When the evils of divorce are all that families hear about, it makes coping with the normal transitions and changes that inevitably accompany divorce more difficult. Negative messages make children feel different and lesser, leading to feelings of shame and guilt” (Ahrons, 2004, p. 526).

While results from many studies indicate that children of divorce tend to have more problems than children in families in which the marriage stays intact, other studies find no statistical difference, and some report that children in divorced families might be better off than those in conflictual biological families that remain intact (Amato, 2001). The differences in findings are usually related to methodological differences, including the perspective of the researcher. Interestingly, Ihinger-Tallman and Cooney (2005) cited research stating that “almost half of the children whose parents remarry view their families as close, relaxed, and with a large amount of sharing” (p. 282).

Considering the negative perspective often present in the literature regarding stepfamilies, these results are quite positive and one wonders if a larger percentage of intact, biological families could report similar views. Further investigation might reveal that a negative

mindset and deficit perspective have influenced the framing of the questions asked and issues pursued (Amato, 2001), to the point that stepfamily researchers have missed noting that many biological families also go through periods of emotional tension and distance. It might be quite fruitful to compare stepfamilies early in their formation with intact families that have recently gone through a major life crisis. It is possible that the results would reveal that stepfamilies are often adjusting as well as can be expected considering the challenges they have confronted and experienced thus far.

A major element of the deficit approach is the oft-cited assertion by clinicians Visher and Visher (1996) that stepfamilies are “born out of loss.” Certainly this would be true for those who seek clinical or therapeutic services, but few if any researchers seem to question whether it is necessarily a valid presupposition that this is true for all divorcees. In fact, not all divorcing individuals experience divorce as loss or emotional crisis. There are a variety of situations in which one or both partners may consider separation and divorce to be the next logical, perhaps even desirable, step.

In his seminal work, Bohannon (1971) described six stages of divorce, with the first being emotional divorce, in which typically one party begins to emotionally withdraw from the relationship months and even years before the conscious thought of divorce surfaces in his/her mind. Evidence from other researchers indicates that in many, if not most, situations one partner has clearly emotionally divorced before the actual concept is discussed with the partner. As a result, it is relatively common for one partner to have already reconciled with the idea of divorce, whereas the other partner may have had no prior indications and thus may be shocked that his/her partner is struggling with the relationship, much less wanting a divorce. In other situations, the relationship may have been so tumultuous that both parties are ready to separate,

or in the case of abuse, one must actually escape. A third possibility is that both parties come to the realization that the relationship has grown cold or meaningless and are dissatisfied with remaining in the marriage.

Thus a highly relevant factor virtually ignored in divorce and stepfamily research is the degree to which the participants actually sense “loss” as opposed to relief or even happiness that they are now single and have new options and opportunities before them. The individual who is stunned and shocked may very likely find adjustment much more difficult than her/his ex-spouse who has been in the process of emotionally separating or divorcing for years. It is therefore a challenge to do consistent research when studies may be including participants with radically different perspectives on their divorce and repartnering, yet this is rarely mentioned in the literature.

The deficit model reflects a bias on the part of the researcher, and can lead to what the researcher was looking for, negative findings. For example, Brenner and Hyde (2006) compared and contrasted two decadal meta-analyses of children of divorce. The first was by Reifman, Villa, Amans, Rethinam, and Telesca, published in 2001, in which they found that “the negative impact of divorce on children had increased” over the past decade, “especially in psychological adjustment, mother-child relations, school achievement, and conduct.” In contrast, a similar analysis by Gately and Schwebel found that “children of divorce showed enhanced levels of functioning in maturity, self-esteem, empathy, and androgyny” (Brenner & Hyde, p. 94).

Researchers routinely conduct studies which compare or contrast intact, nuclear families with stepfamilies, which consistently place the stepfamily in a negative and apparently deficient position (Gamache, 1997). Researchers conducting such comparisons generally fail to point out that the nuclear family has had years of shared experiences and time for adaptation, whereas

stepfamilies in many studies have had only a few months or years together to adapt and adjust to one another. To be truly beneficial, stepfamily research needs to compare stepfamilies with other stepfamilies (Coleman et al., 2000).

### Summary

Whether or not they acknowledged it, those involved in doing stepfamily research have approached their studies from one or more theoretical perspectives or assumptions. Social Learning Theory has provided an important perspective on how new stepfathers learn new roles and fit into the family structure. With its emphasis on the meanings attached to roles and role expectations, Symbolic Interaction Theory serves as a valuable framework for understanding the relative strain or satisfaction a stepfather finds in his role within his new family. Family Systems Theory enables researchers to grasp and address the complexities of stepfamily systems and their inner workings. The Deficit Perspective, and its close kin the Normal Family Perspective and the Family Stress Perspective, is not a theory but rather a pervasive assumption that stepfamilies are largely problematic when compared to intact, nuclear families.

### Challenges, Roles, and Adjustments

Over the years numerous studies have been conducted and books and articles written about stepfamilies. Amato (2001) reported finding over 9,000 publications during the decade of the 1990's alone. While one might assume that all possible aspects of stepfamilies have been researched, the reality is that because each stepfamily and stepfamily member is unique, there is an incredibly wide range of aspects to study, possibilities of variables to use, and facets to explore. As a result, nearly every stepfamily researcher uses a different combination of variables and types of respondents (Amato, 2001; Bray, 1994; Simons, et al., 1999), making it very difficult at times to compare and contrast the results from various studies.

In the following section I will attempt present a brief overview of some primary areas in which there is general agreement regarding the roles of stepfathers and a summary of literature regarding factors affecting children's adjustment to their stepfathers. Finally, even though it has been explored only within the intact, nuclear family, a review of the literature regarding maternal gatekeeping will be presented since it may be present in mother-stepfather relationships and affect stepfathers' relationships with their stepchildren.

### Stepfather Research

With the role of stepfather largely undefined and each situation unique, it is quite difficult to create categories or even generalizations that will serve to guide new stepfathers and their families (Shopper, 2001). The degree of comfort or closeness between stepfathers and their stepchildren, the gender of their biological children and their ages, the stepparents' relationships with their biological children, and the length of time stepparents have lived in stepfamilies all impact the general success of the role learning and adaptation of stepfathers (Bray, 1994; Golish, 2000).

Perhaps one of the saddest and most poignant statements about the role of stepfathers was made by Simon over 40 years ago when he wrote, "It has even been stated that there is such a prejudice regarding stepfathers that they do not matter at all" (1964, cited by Brenner in Cath & Shopper, 2001, p. 70). Yet based on the large amount of literature available regarding stepfathers, it is apparent that, at least from the perspective of family scientists, stepfathers matter a great deal. The preponderance of stepfamily research has focused on stepfathers (Amato, 2001) for three primary reasons:

1. With approximately 84% of divorcing biological mothers in the United States being awarded primary residential custody of their children, the vast majority of remarriages involve stepfathers with no residential biological children (Kreider & Fields, 2005).
2. Stepfathers are confronted with the greatest number of adjustments because they are new in the stepfamily system, and are expected to find or create places for themselves in systems of relationships that have been established for some time before their entry into the family (Bray, et al., 1994). Applying family systems theory, one could expect that existing family systems will by nature resist change and may attempt to expel or at least leave the stepfathers on the outside of the systems' boundaries.
3. Stepfathers are the ones who will leave the family system if things do not work out, as happens in nearly two-thirds of remarriages (Amato, 2001). The mother-child dyad will remain intact, although changed as a result of the interaction, and the divorced stepfather will no longer be a residential part of the family. Because stepfathers are the ones who will leave, it is important to identify and study those aspects of stepfathering that can help new stepfathers succeed in learning and fulfilling their new roles.

### *Stepfather Adjustments*

Potentially great challenges await the men who become stepfathers. They must attempt to create new roles as well as develop a sense of balance between responsibilities to and concern for any biological children from a previous relationship or marriage, their previous spouses, their new wives and their children, as well as any children who may be born into this new union (Guisinger, Cowan, & Schuldberg, 1989). Areas upon which there ultimately needs to be some measure of agreement between stepfathers and their wives regarding stepfathers' roles in their new stepfamilies would include discipline, feelings and expressions of affection between

stepfathers and their stepchildren, financial support of the stepchildren, and the role that noncustodial parents or nonresidential children of former marriages will play in the new family (Bray et al., 1994).

### *Entry Posture*

While biological fathers normally expect to function as parents (i.e. care for their children, to be loved or at least respected by them, and to mentor and discipline them as needed), stepfathers often discover that none of those functions are expected or even wanted. A widely cited longitudinal study by Hetherington found that attempts by stepfathers to engage in either authoritative or authoritarian parenting led to significant behavioral problems with their stepchildren for at least the first two years, and those stepfathers were less likely to be positively accepted by their stepchildren (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Hetherington concluded that the most effective strategy for stepfathers to gain their stepchildren's acceptance was to enter the family as another adult, similar to the role of a family friend, and to make no initial attempt to parent the children (Hetherington, 1987).

Cherlin and Furstenberg (1994) suggested that stepparents should be perceived more like other adults in children's lives, such as close adult friends or extended family rather than as biological parents. Both clinicians (Visher & Visher, 1996) and family researchers (Fine, Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Mason, Svare & Wolfner, 2002) agree that stepfathers will find greater acceptance over time if they enter their stepparent role as a friend to the child or support for the mother (Svare, Jay & Mason, 2004, p. 83). Bray and colleagues (1994) noted that the marital relationship was enhanced and satisfaction was greater in those couples in which stepfathers were not expected to form close relationships with their stepchildren early in their marriages.

In a qualitative study of stepfathers involving 21 predominantly white, middle class stepfamilies, Svare et al. (2004) found that early attempts by stepfathers to enact the disciplinary and emotional roles of a biological parent brought about more negative long-term outcomes than those who entered the family system as an adult friend or companion to the children's mother. Of the stepfamily types identified in their research, the most common was the Replication Family, in which stepfamilies attempted to replicate the nuclear, biological family pattern. Although this pattern was adopted by nearly half of the stepfather families in the study, this was negatively correlated to the children's age at the time of remarriage – the younger the children, the more likely that they would respond favorably to the presence and assumed role of the new stepfather.

Some of the mothers in Svare's 2004 study sought out and selected husbands who appeared to have the potential to be good parents. These women reported wanting or needing assistance in disciplining their children, and expected immediate assistance in those areas from their new husbands. However, some stepfathers noted that this expectation created internal dissonance for them, and they feared it would place them in the position of being perceived as the bad guys by their stepchildren. Svare and colleagues concluded that the stepparents in their study were attempting to fill a perceived parental/disciplinarian gap in the family created by divorce. How stepparents determined what the gap was in their individual family configuration and how they determined the best way to meet it was not reported, although the authors advised stepfamilies to seek the aid of clinicians in doing so.

The parenting style of stepparents affects the children's response to them, just as it does with parents and their biological children, although usually not in the same way. Competent parents are generally emotionally warm and supportive, consistent in enforcing family rules, and avoid harsh disciplinary measures (Fine et al., 1999; Hetherington, 1987; Maccoby, 1992;

Simons et al., 1999). Regarding stepchildren's relationships with their stepfathers, it has been proposed that younger children (under age 9) have an easier time accepting a "warm and involved stepparent" than one who is distant or emotionally uninvolved (Gamache, 1997). Whiteside (1989) suggested that preschool aged children can form strong emotional relationships with a nurturing stepparent and that it is in this type of situation that "a role approximating that of a biological parent role has the best chance of success" (Gamache, p. 53).

In the early stages of stepfamily formation, stepfathers typically become relatively involved in parenting their stepchildren, but when they find their efforts are not as welcome by the children as they had hoped or expected, their involvement reduces (Cowdery & Knudson-Martin, 2005; Dunn, 2004). Hetherington (1987) surmised that this lack of responsiveness on the part of the children might be because "it seems likely that in the early stage of remarriage, the new stepfather is viewed as an intruder or competitor for the mother's affection" (p. 201). This becomes increasingly evident as children approach adolescence or they have lived with their mothers in a mother-child subsystem for an extended period of time prior to their mother's remarriage.

Although there are mixed results (Stewart, 2007), it is generally agreed that when biological fathers actively participate in child rearing tasks it helps generate emotional bonds between fathers and their children, changing both the father and child in the process. Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) speculated that similar behaviors on the part of stepfathers may also facilitate a more positive relationship with their stepchildren.

Stewart (2007) cited several studies which indicated that it is usually better for stepfathers to be somewhat reserved emotionally from their stepchildren, serving primarily as support for their wives. However, this may be reflective of the tendency of many stepfamily

researchers to focus upon upper elementary and adolescent children. Hetherington (1987) described the first two years of life for a stepfather as being like a stranger “who is attempting to be ingratiating, is seeking information, and is polite but emotionally disengaged” (p. 196).

### *Stepfather Role Formation*

The roles of mother and biological child are part of most families, regardless of family structure or form, so those roles are socially and culturally well defined and institutionalized. In contrast, the role of stepfather is ambiguous and relatively undefined (Shopper, 2001; Visher & Visher, 1990). Bray (1999) noted that, “Role ambiguity seems to be a hallmark of stepfamilies” (p. 266). From the symbolic interaction and social learning theoretical perspectives, stepfathers learn their roles from somewhere. They will learn at least part of their roles from their new wives and stepchildren, who provide feedback which either reinforces or discourages his various behaviors. Stepfathers’ past experiences (positive and/or negative), whether from their own childhoods or from previous parenting experience, exert a major influence on the roles they develop and shapes their expectations as they enter family systems (Shopper, 2001). Brenner (2001) referred to this process of finding meaning and fulfillment within the new family as the “stepfather’s search for legitimacy” (p. 69).

There is surprisingly little literature regarding how stepfathers learn and acquire their roles, with only about 5% of studies actually focused on the *role* or behavior of stepfathers (Everett, 1998; Fine et al., 1997). Fast and Cain (1966) were among the first to examine the dilemma confronting new stepfathers whether or not they should assume the roles and responsibilities of biological fathers to their stepchildren. Cherlin (1978) also asserted that because of the ambiguity of the roles of each stepfamily member, and especially between stepfathers and their stepchildren, there needed to be an on-going negotiation of new roles and

relationships. Numerous writers have echoed this idea, noting that the lack of normative roles and guidelines for stepfathers is a major stressor within stepfamily relationships (Bray et al., 1994; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1987; Walker & Messinger, 1979; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2007), and the degree of success achieved will likely affect the success of adjustment and overall quality of stepfamily life (Fine, 1997; Shopper, 2001).

In research examining the relationship between stepfathers' role clarity and their perceived adjustment within the stepfamily, Fine and colleagues (1997) used self-report measures with 39 white, Midwestern, predominantly middle class stepfathers who were demographically similar to a sample selected from the National Survey of Families and Households. The stepfathers had been married to their current spouses and in a stepfamily situation for an average of five years. When there were larger discrepancies between stepfathers and their wives' expectations regarding the stepfathers' roles within the stepfamily, there was "less satisfaction and more shame" (p. 521) on the part of the stepfather. Conversely, smaller discrepancies between spousal expectations led to a greater sense of satisfaction within the relationship. They also found that part of meeting expectations for many women was that their new husbands should be involved to some extent in assisting them in the discipline of their children.

Fine and colleagues (1997) acknowledged that their results differed from some previous studies that indicated that stepfathers should assume the role of friendly adults within stepfamilies rather than attempt to become disciplining parents (Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington, 1993; Visher & Visher, 1996). The differences may have resulted from their methodological decision to investigate only the self-perceptions of stepfathers, with no opportunity given for spouses or stepchildren to interact with the men's responses or offer their

own perceptions of their behaviors. Their study was cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, as was Hetherington's whose study also involved more participants. Finally, Fine acknowledged that those stepfathers who were more engaged in fathering roles also were at higher risk for emotional distress and depression, which did concur with clinicians (e.g. Visher and Visher).

A limitation of Fine's (1997) study was that the men averaged 5.8 years in their roles as stepfathers, but the range was from .6-13 years. In each family a stepchild was designated as the focus child, and the stepchildren were between the ages of 10 and 18 (Fine et al., 1997). In other words, some stepfathers had been in their roles long enough that they were the only parents their children knew. Others had been in the role for a short time with limited experience in their roles as stepfathers, and thus might have been experiencing a relative honeymoon phase. Therefore, the varying lengths of time the participants had for adjusting and performing their roles as stepfathers was a major and unaccounted for intervening variable. As a result, stepfathers who were new to their roles might not have experienced negative repercussions from their children as a result of their parenting behaviors. The stepfathers who had younger children and had been married to their mothers for most of the children's lives would have had very different approaches and experiences with parenting than those who might have recently married a woman with adolescent children.

Men who become stepfathers are simultaneously trying to learn, develop, and implement their roles with their new wives and their children (Everett, 1998). Not only does society provide little assistance in terms of institutionalized roles, but researchers have found that it is common for stepfathers to have no prior preparation by their new wives. Stepfathers often have few role guidelines and possibly little or no direction from their wives, as one study found that only slightly over half (56%) of remarried couples had even discussed parenting roles and

responsibilities before remarrying (Stewart, 2007). This may be because divorced individuals tend to remarry rather quickly and often do not discuss in-depth issues such as finances or parenting (Svare et al., 2004). Regardless of the reasons, findings indicate that nearly half of stepfathers enter into new situations in which they may have little awareness of their new stepfamilies' dynamics and expectations. Without such direction, new stepfathers are confronted by myriad possibilities and potential roles – with some attempting to assume the role of biological father, others entering the stepfamily more as a family friend, while still others either do not clearly assume a role or else are only minimally involved with their stepchildren (Ereira-Weatherly, 1996), just as biological fathers can assume many roles.

There is little in the literature regarding the process through which men pass in the process of learning their roles as stepfathers. Much of the literature regarding stepfather adjustment tends to focus on their roles and relationships with their wives and stepchildren at the time of the study. Thus the research examines the inner workings, roles, and relationships of stepfamilies after a period of time has elapsed since the marriage. Few studies have explored the families' history, the processes in which the stepfamilies engaged during the formative period from before they married until some of the major adjustments had been made and hurdles at least tentatively cleared (Everett, 1998). While this focus on the present rather than the process is helpful in answering some questions, it does not contribute to the understanding of the processes through which stepfathers pass in adapting, adjusting, and learning their roles in forming new stepfamilies.

In summary, along with many other aspects of the relationship, the role assumed by stepfathers can impact the degree of openness and effectiveness of communication between them and their children. Consistent with other aspects of stepfather research, findings indicate that

children are more willing to be open in their communication and interactions with stepparents who do not assume an active parental role, but rather that of a friend within the family (Coleman & Ganong, 1995; Fine & Kurdek, 1992).

### *Marital Relationship*

Another factor affecting stepfathers' role formation and the success of stepfamilies' adjustment is the establishment and maintenance of strong marital relationships. One of the common factors impacting newly formed stepfamilies is the relative lack of time that the couple has alone, without the children, in which to bond with each other once they begin to cohabit or marry. Frequently, biological parents have an advantage over stepparents in that they have time to develop their relationship as a couple before the arrival of their first child. Once the new child arrives, both parents have the opportunity to grow attached and bond to their child over time. Stepfathers do not go through the same process in developing bonds with their new spouses apart from the children, and they usually have minimal time to bond with their stepchildren before the stepfamily begins. When couples form new stepfamilies, stepfathers face the dual challenges of building their relationships with their wives as well as establishing new roles and relationships with their wives' children (Svare et al., 2004). Felker, Fromme, Arnaut and Stoll (2002) recounted one stepparent's comment that "we didn't have a very long romance or honeymoon period. In fact, we never had a honeymoon period...When [the stepchild] came home, the romance went right out of our marriage" (p. 131).

Many studies, especially by clinicians, indicate that stepparents who report strong and satisfactory marital relationships also report greater satisfaction with their relationships with their stepchildren (Everett, 1998; Visher, Visher, & Pasley, 2003). Ihinger-Tallman and Pasley (1997) asserted that couples find greater marital satisfaction when the relationship between stepparents

and stepchildren is satisfying to both parties. Hetherington (1987) found that stepfathers consistently reported that their relationships with their stepchildren had a negative effect upon their marital relationship. However, others have found no significant correlation between the quality of marital relationships and stepfather's relationships with their stepchildren (MacDonald & DeMaris, 1995; Marsiglio, 1992). Two factors contribute to those apparent discrepancies in results. First, as frequently happens in stepfamily research, there were different methodological approaches and purposes for their studies. Visher and colleagues used smaller, clinical samples whereas MacDonald and colleagues based their studies on the National Survey of Families and Households. Secondly, the researchers utilized different variables to come at their information.

Bray (1994) reported that remarried couples are more satisfied with their relationship and their roles when new stepfathers are not pressured or expected to immediately assume a parental role or quickly develop a close relationship with the stepchildren, but are instead allowed to grow into the parental role over time. He also found a surprising degree of agreement among remarried couples in terms of roles and parenting arrangements, concluding that "normative models develop *within* stepfamilies" (emphases his), but does not propose how this happens (p. 85).

In summary, we have seen how stepfathers' role learning and adjustment is fraught with challenges, from their entry posture to achieving some measure of acceptance and satisfaction in their roles as stepfathers. Much of their adjustment and role learning will be affected by their stepchildren and a number of factors in their lives, which are examined more closely in the next section.

### Children and Divorce

Stepfamilies often are formed out of loss (Visher & Visher, 2001), and "children and their new stepparents start off their relationships with two strikes against them. They have to

fight an uphill battle to overcome negative expectations, and they have to do so without much help from society” (Ahrns, 2004, p. 532).

While divorce is commonly researched and treated as a punctiliar, static event, it is in fact a process involving a series of emotional, legal, and psychological stages or periods of adjustment (Bohannon, 1971) and necessitates multiple transitions for all involved (Hines, 1997). The emotional process of divorce typically begins months and sometimes years in advance of even the first mention of separation and divorce. This period of time may be marked by growing tension, and while the adults and older children may understand what is transpiring, younger children may only sense that things are not right (Hines, 1997).

A variety of transitions occur throughout the dissolution and divorce process, often followed by the development of a new relationship, eventual cohabitation and/or remarriage, and the establishment of a different family form. The transitions may not end there, because the divorce rate is higher for second (and higher order) marriages than for first marriages, and they usually end much faster than do first marriages (Amato, 2001). With second marriages averaging approximately five years duration (Bray, 1994), some families go through a series of familial transitions. Each successive transition presents individuals and family systems with unique and sometimes problematic adjustments, especially for the children involved (Amato, 2001; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Therefore, it is not surprising that the effects of divorce and remarriage upon children are the most researched topic in the stepfamily literature (Coleman et al., 2000; Stewart, 2007).

#### *Child's Age/Stage of Development*

While a multitude of factors may affect the development of the relationship between children and their new stepfathers, “the single factor that has garnered greater support and

virtually no contradictory evidence is the age of the child at the time the stepparent enters the family” (Gamache, 1997, p. 51). Approximately one-half of children experiencing parental divorce will do so by the age of six (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2007), and younger children (pre-school and early elementary) are generally found to be more flexible and adaptable toward new living arrangements and a new adult in their lives than are children who are in middle elementary school and older (Dunn, 2004). Research also indicates that stepfathers are most likely to enter into a parent-like role and have stronger emotional bonds with their stepchildren when the children are preschool age at the beginning of the step-relationship (Whiteside, 1989). Pre-adolescents and adolescents tend to resist and resent an additional person attempting to parent or control them (Baumrind, 1991; Bray & Berger, 1993).

While some children may welcome a new person into the family, it is more common for children to be at least somewhat opposed to their mothers’ remarrying. They may feel that they have already lost their fathers and do not want to lose their mothers to the men they are marrying. In addition, it is common for children of all ages to entertain hopes and dreams of the original family reuniting (Visher & Visher, 1996). Pre-school and early elementary age children, not fully understanding the meaning of or reason for their parents’ divorces, may feel that they somehow are to blame. Other children may resent the new men in their mothers’ lives, feeling somehow disloyal to their fathers if they like or enjoy being with their stepfathers. Adolescents, already developmentally growing more independent of their parents, may resent another adult attempting to exert any semblance of parental authority in their lives. For these and other reasons, children are often cited as the major factor contributing to the breakup of second marriages (Cooksey et al., 1997).

Children's stage of development at the time of divorce and stepfamily formation has a great effect on their understanding of and response to parental separation and remarriage, yet very few studies include this critical variable (Dunlop, Burns, & Bermingham, 2001). Stage of development has been found to serve as an indicator of the amount of time that will likely be required for the relationship between stepfathers and their stepchildren to develop to the point that stepparents can become psychological parents: that is, stepparents are perceived by their children as occupying the role of parent in their lives (Gamache, 1997). Various other researchers have noted that children's ages at the time of their mothers' remarriage impact their perceptions of their stepfathers and to some extent the degree to which psychological parenting is possible (Bray, 1999; Coleman et al., 2000; Marsiglio, 1992). Mills (1984) originally proposed that it takes children about one year to adjust to their new stepparents for every year old they are when their stepparents enter their families (cited in Gamache, 1997, p. 52). Mills surmised that stepparents must be within the biological parent-child system for approximately half of the lifespan of that relationship before stepparents may begin to fill the actual role of parents to their stepchildren. In other words, if a child is six years old at the time of her mother's remarriage, she will need to be at least nine years old before she will begin to regard her stepfather as a parent.

#### *Sex of the Child*

One of the most widely cited studies of children's relationships with their mothers post-divorce and with their mothers and stepfathers following remarriage was conducted by Hetherington in the late 1970's. Her longitudinal study of 124 white, middle class families utilized several methods to observe and analyze the first six years of these families post-divorce. Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1985) reported that children's sex made a difference in the type and quality of relationship they have with their divorced mothers. While divorced mothers and their

daughters tend to develop a closer, more emotionally supportive relationship, divorced mothers and their sons tended toward a highly conflictual relationship, the highest of any family dyad (Hetherington, 1987).

Children's sex also was found to affect how they received a stepfather into their families, not only initially but over time. Girls in general, and preadolescent and older girls in particular, found it exceptionally difficult to accept new stepfathers, perhaps because they had developed emotionally close relationships with their mothers during the time their mothers were not married (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Boys were found to have an easier time adjusting to their stepfathers after the first two years or so, perhaps finding it beneficial to have a man in the household who shared similar interests and activities. However, the closeness of the stepfather-stepson relationship often negatively correlated with the amount of involvement they had with their biological fathers (Hetherington, 1987). In other words, boys who had greater involvement with their biological fathers tended to have greater difficulty positively adjusting to their stepfathers, whereas those with minimal involvement with their biological fathers were more likely to make positive adjustments and develop closer relationships with their stepfathers.

#### *Mother-child relationship*

The length of time children have been alone with their biological mothers post-divorce also influences their degree of receptivity to new stepfathers. This is due to the emotionally close bonds and mutual dependence that often develops when children live alone with single parents. Divorced, single mothers are frequently confronted with increased financial responsibilities and reduced income, and so they must work more to support themselves and their children (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1996). Despite increased work loads and reduced parenting time, the bonds between divorced mothers and their children can become very close. Older children are

typically relied upon to watch younger siblings, assume some of the roles of their absent fathers, and become emotional supports or confidantes for their mothers (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000).

Therefore, from a systems perspective, the longer the child and mother have been together in their own system, the stronger the bond will be between them, and the more likely it is that the child will perceive and desire that their system's boundary is fairly rigid and impermeable. When mothers choose to marry, they initiate the inclusion of their new partners into their family system, but resistance and resentment on the part of the children may lead to a lack of acceptance of their new stepfathers (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; Walker & Messinger, 1991).

Just as each child in a family has his or her own unique characteristics and requires different approaches in parenting, so also children within the same family may show major differences in how they adjust following a divorce or remarriage. Dunn (2004) found that in terms of children's adjustment to stepfathers "there is greater variance within than between families," showing "marked differences in their relationships with their parents" (p. 3). As would be indicated by SIT, some stepfamily research suggests that children's perspectives and their acceptance of their stepparents and their roles, rather than the stepparents' actual behavior, are the most influential in building strong stepfamilies (Brown, Green, & Druckman, 1990; Fine et al., 1998). The degree to which children accept and adapt to their parents' new marital relationships has been found to be of great importance, not only for the children but also for the success of their stepfamilies (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). The Thomas Theorem, one of the theorems within SIT, states that perception is reality, and has real consequences (White & Klein, 2002). Although the actions and behaviors of stepfathers are important and impact their

stepchildren, ultimately it is their stepchildren's perceptions of their stepfathers' behaviors that affects how they behave toward their stepfathers and others in the stepfamily (Golish, 2000).

### *Gaps in Understanding Children's Perceptions*

There are at least two largely unexplored areas in the literature regarding children's relationships with their stepfathers. First, few studies have been conducted in which children's perspectives were sought (Gamache, 1997). Instead, most research has involved surveying adults (i.e. teachers, parents) regarding how a child has responded to divorce or stepfamily arrangement, including behaviors such as acting out, changes in academic performance, and apparent happiness (Dunn, 2004). In one of the few studies involving children, almost one-half of the stepchildren reported that their stepparents should function as friends to them. In addition, children were more likely than parents or stepparents to label the stepparents' role as something other than a parent (Fine et al., 1997). Gamache (1997) argued that "children often construct their relationships with their stepparents in ways that are beyond the nuclear family model" (p. 43). Thus, stepchildren will often differ from their parents and stepparents in their views and expectations of their stepparents' roles than those of their parents and stepparents, whose views and expectations of stepparents' roles are more congruent with each other than with the children's views.

Notable by its absence in the literature is a study that addresses how and when children's perceptions of their stepfathers and their roles are formed. From the perspective of SLT, children's reactions to events and outside stimuli will be reflective of their parent(s) reactions. For example, if children perceive their mothers as emotionally steady and okay with their divorces, they will tend to emulate their behaviors and attitudes. So the scarcity of research

regarding how children form their understandings and perceptions of their new stepfathers is a significant gap in the literature.

A survey of the extant literature indicates that children's adjustment to their new stepfathers is influenced by a wide range of variables, including their sex, their chronological and developmental age, their individual temperament, the length and type of relationship with their mothers, and their mother's actions and reactions during the divorce and re-partnering transitions (Brenner & Hyde, 2006; Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; Gamache, 1997; Simons et al., 1999).

However, little is known about how biological mothers may coach or teach their children about what they should expect from their new stepfathers, including the stepfathers' parental and disciplinary roles, as well as how the children should view and interact with their stepfathers. With mothers being the constant relational element in children's lives, it seems that mothers have or could have a much greater role in their children's adjustment to their stepfathers than the dearth of literature would suggest.

### Mothers

Over 20 years ago, Rosin (1987) identified several basic variables that impact the formation of stepfathers' roles –

age, number, sex, and attitudes of the stepchildren, the children's relationship with their biological father, the attitude of the stepfather toward his role, the attitude of the mother and her ability to communicate regarding his role, and the stepfather's relationship with his own biological children" (Rosin, 1987, p. 71).

As demonstrated above, the literature is replete with studies regarding stepfathers and factors affecting children post-divorce as well as those in stepfamily relationships. However,

research on Rosin's fourth variable is notably lacking – the biological mother's attitudes and ability to communicate with her new husband regarding his role.

A great deal of what is known about biological mothers in stepfamilies actually relates to their parenting and the relationships with their children while they were single mothers following divorce, rather than their lives and roles within stepfamilies (Coleman et al., 2000; Stewart, 2007). In the following sections, the literature regarding the mother as single parent will be reviewed. Also, maternal gatekeeping in intact, nuclear families will be examined since this subject has had limited exploration in the context of stepfamilies but appears to be relevant in understanding mothers' behaviors in stepfamily formation.

### *Mother as Single Parent*

The first two years following divorce have been described as a crisis period for mothers and their children (Hetherington, 1987). During that time, divorced mothers typically undergo emotional distress, reduced financial resources, loneliness, and often physical relocation, thus affecting (and often reducing) their social support network. They are confronted with new responsibilities, new roles and changing relationships. Much of the research indicates that divorced women are at greater risk for depression than women in intact marriages (Amato, 2000; Zimmerman, Brown, & Portes, 2004). In a relatively small study (n = 58), Zimmerman and colleagues found that all of the divorced participants exhibited some degree of depression. Amato (2000) cited a large study in Britain in which researchers compared married and divorced women and found that divorce increased the likelihood of women becoming depressed by 188%. Divorced women not only have a greater incidence of depression, they are also more likely to exhibit antisocial tendencies than are married women (Simon et al., 1999).

Other researchers argue that there is a self-selection process that may account for these differences whereby women who are depressed or exhibit antisocial tendencies may be more likely to divorce than those who are not (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). Further, there are those who may be divorced because of the presence of mental/emotional illness or inadequate relational abilities (Amato, 1993; Zimmerman et al., 2004). Clearly further research is needed to help further our understanding of the relationship between divorce and mental health issues, but the evidence so far indicates that the stressors of divorce can make women vulnerable to depression and other challenges to their mental and emotional health (Amato, 2000).

Factors such as cumulative stress and mental illness can greatly affect the custodial mother's parenting style and overall ability to parent. Cooksey and colleagues (1997) found that "it is the mother's psychosocial resources, including her own sense of self-worth and her earlier propensity for acting out behavior, that are particularly critical for young children's emotional well-being" (p. 637). Svare et al. (2004) asserted that the primary elements of parenting could be described as warmth and control, both of which can be compromised by the stresses encountered in the process of divorce. Amato (2004) found that "although several mechanisms are responsible for the link between divorce and children's problems, the most important factor is deterioration in the quality of the parent-child relationships" (p. 31).

Maternal depression has been found to be related to "more irritable and inconsistent parenting behavior and less warmth and positive responsiveness, especially toward sons" compared to mothers who are not depressed (Hetherington, 1987; Wolchik, Wilcox, Tein, & Sandler, 2000). Mothers who become depressed during or after their divorces are at risk of becoming uninvolved parents, and are more likely to use ineffective parenting practices than are mothers who are continuously married and not depressed (Simons et al., 1999). Such mothers

tend to provide less emotional support, less involvement, less control, less supervision for their children, and utilize less effective disciplinary measures than mothers who were in intact first marriages (Hetherington, 1987; Simons, 1999; Zimmerman et al., 2004).

While mothers may be going through emotional distress and depression, their children also face emotional challenges and may have reduced access to their previous social and support networks, including their biological fathers and their extended families (Stewart, 2007).

Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why children of recently divorced parents tend to have internal emotional problems and external conduct and behavioral issues (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1996). Although there are many identifiable factors, the literature indicates that the two most critical factors affecting children's post-divorce adjustment are the mental well-being of the custodial parent and the quality of the child's relationship with that parent (Zimmerman et al., 2004). Results from a longitudinal study by Dunlop, Burns, and Bermingham (2001) indicated that the quality of the relationship between mothers and their adolescent children was closely related to the sense of well-being for the children.

Research increasingly points to the critical role of mothers for children's adjustment during and after divorce. Simons et al. (1999) reported that the only consistent factor affecting children's adjustment was the quality of their mother's parenting, and was found to be true for both boys and girls. In addition, they found that although boys are often at increased risk for delinquent behavior following divorce, they were no more likely to engage in delinquent behavior than boys from intact nuclear families when both parents used effective parenting techniques. Boys were at risk for internalizing problems and depression when there had been "pre-divorce parental conflict, mother depression, and low quality parenting by the mother" (Simons et al., 1999, p. 1030). Girls following parental divorce were found to have no greater

inclination toward depression than girls in intact homes if the mother avoided depression and maintained effective parenting practices (Simons et al., 1999).

Not only does the mental health of mothers impact their children and the children's relationships with them, but the psychological functioning of the mothers was strongly related with the functioning of their families (Zimmerman et al., 2004). Mothers' abilities to move forward into the formation of successful new relationships are impacted by their levels of depression.

Life as a divorced single parent can be difficult, but it is usually of rather short duration with approximately 75% of divorced women remarrying within a few years (Stewart, 2007). The first two years after remarriage can be times of turmoil and adjustment, yet mothers typically report increased satisfaction with their lives and marriages during that time. After all the changes and adjustments and possibly experiencing loneliness and/or depression during the period between marriages, the stability and companionship provided by their new husbands enables mothers to see the children/stepfather adjustments from a positive perspective.

### *Mother as Gatekeeper*

Maternal gatekeeping in nuclear, intact families has been explored and researched primarily in the last 20 years. Defined as "a collection of beliefs and behaviors that ultimately inhibit a collaborative effort between men and women in family work by limiting men's opportunities for learning and growing through caring for home and children" (Allen & Hawkins, 1999, p. 200), it is important to explore whether or not maternal gatekeeping is present in stepfamilies, and if so, its role in the formation of stepfathers' roles and adjustments within their stepfamilies.

In a relatively large (n= 144) but primarily homogeneous (predominantly white middle class mothers from intact families) study, DeLuccie (1995) used a variety of instruments to help determine the relative influence of six possible predictors of father-child relationships. Factors included the mothers' perceptions of their husbands' involvement with their target (in this study the oldest) children, as well as aspects regarding mothers satisfaction with their marital relationships. Participating mothers had children ranging from 20 months to 19 years of age.

Results indicated that the strongest predictors of maternal mediation in father-child involvement were the mothers' attitudes toward the value and importance of paternal involvement with their children, the mothers' level of satisfaction with their husbands' involvement with their children, and the ages of the target children. DeLuccie (1995) found a negative correlation between the ages of the children and the amount of paternal involvement, which meant that biological fathers spent decreasing amounts of time with their children as the children grew older. Furthermore, results of that study indicated that mothers' attitudes and expectations of the fathers' involvement with their children played a key role in overall paternal involvement.

Examining maternal gatekeeping from the perspective of the social construction of gender, Allen and Hawkins (1999) focused upon maternal gatekeeping in middle class, intact families. They conducted their study (n=622) with women who were married, employed, and had at least one child at home. These results were compared with a statistically similar sample from the 1993-1994 National Survey of Families and Households. They found a significant and positive correlation between the three dimensions of maternal gatekeeping: "mother's reluctance to relinquish responsibility over family matters by setting rigid standards, external validation of a mothering identity, and differentiated conceptions of family roles" (Allen & Hawkins, 1999, p.

199). They hypothesized that mothers enjoy the “authority, privilege, and status their position gives them in the family” (p. 203), and supported DeLuccie’s findings that mothers may gate-keep some household roles and responsibilities because their identity as mother is critical to them and that allowing the fathers to become involved will in some way detract from or diminish that role (p. 204).

Allen and Hawkins (1999) noted that fathers in American culture are often conceptualized as being deficient in comparison to mothers in their parenting abilities, motivation, and overall contributions to the parenting of their children, and therefore need to learn their parenting roles and responsibilities from their wives. It is understandable why maternal gatekeeping can be such a powerful, but often unconscious, force within families if biological fathers are perceived as inadequate by their partners (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Doherty & Needle, 1991). Fagan and Barnett (2003) asserted that if fathers and mothers can construct their roles in conjunction with each other, they can develop a collaborative style of parenting that allows both parents to bring their strengths to bear upon the tasks at hand, and complement one another in their evolving roles. Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) described this as “how fathers and mothers create each other” (p. 343).

In a qualitative study of the construction of the role of mother, Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) interviewed 50 couples. Participants were in their first marriages and had a child no older than 5 years of age. They were intentionally selected to represent a wide range of racial, educational, and economic backgrounds. The authors approached their study from a feminist perspective utilizing a grounded theoretical approach.

Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) identified three types of couples in reference to the sharing of household tasks – post gender couples, who consciously attempt to divide all

household tasks evenly; gender legacy couples who tend to use gender by default in assigning household tasks; and traditional couples who consciously maintain a gendered division of labor. Results identified two models of mothering – those who perceived mothering as a “gendered talent” and those who saw mothering as a “conscious collaboration” (p. 339). Those couples who saw mothering as a gendered talent were marked by a belief that mothers had a natural bond with their children and instinctively knew what needed to be done, and fathers who reported “feeling incompetent, being fearful, and not knowing what needed to be done” (p. 339). If the fathers hesitated or were disengaged, or the children did not respond as positively to them as they did to their mothers, the mothers then became more engaged than they were previously, and the cycle of reduced paternal involvement would begin again.

In contrast, couples who saw mothering and parenting as a conscious collaboration were marked by working toward equal responsibility for parenting, fathers seeking out opportunities to participate, and mothers allowing them to learn and assume new responsibilities. Over time, as fathers became more nurturant and involved with their children, their emotional closeness with their children grew as well. Not only did these fathers report closer relationships with their children, they also learned new emotional connections with their spouses (Cowdery & Knudson-Martin, 2005)

Mothers’ perceptions, attitudes, and even personal characteristics have been found to play vital roles in the functioning of intact biological families, in which they often serve as “barometers” of both the marital relationship and parenting roles (Hughes, Gordon, & Gaertner, 2004). Mothers’ perceptions of their husbands’ paternal roles have been found to be highly indicative of the degree of fathers’ involvement with their children, even considerably better than fathers’ own perceptions of their paternal roles (McBride & Rane, 1997). Furthermore, mothers’

personal characteristics, such as degree of autonomy, occupation, and age, have been found to be “the best predictors of men’s overall quantity of involvement and time spent care giving” (McBride, Brown, Bost, Shin, Vaughn, & Korth, p. 362).

Studies of maternal gatekeeping share common limitations. One is that maternal gatekeeping has only been examined through the responses of the mothers themselves – no studies were found which sought input from fathers or children. If some mothers do in fact tend to be insecure about their role as mothers or are unsure of their husband’s abilities, their responses may not accurately reflect those feelings, or they might have overestimated their own involvement and underestimated that of their partner (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). Observations by husbands, older children, parents, friends, or others would give a multidimensional perspective rather than the unidimensional self-reports of the mothers. It is possible that respondents attempted to answer questions in a manner that either made them look good or met the perceived expectations of the researcher.

Furthermore, each of the studies involved quantitative surveys, in which the questions and potential answers were listed, thus narrowing the possible responses of the participants, and made no provision for allowing participants to describe their roles and perceptions in their own words. While surveys enable researchers to involve large numbers of participants, responses are limited to those hypothesized by the researcher and may not allow respondents the freedom to creatively and effectively describe their life experiences.

### *Summary*

A relatively small number of studies have been conducted regarding maternal gatekeeping and some of the factors involved have been highlighted. Each of these studies described the role of mothers as gatekeepers in nuclear, intact families, and their influence in

determining the role(s) and responsibilities performed by fathers in the care and discipline of their children. There has been no similar research into the presence or role of maternal gatekeeping in stepfamilies, yet if some mothers in intact families assume the role of gatekeeper they might assume the same role when they form stepfamilies. There might even be a greater tendency for mothers to serve as gatekeepers, because they may be extra protective of their maternal bonds with their biological children. Furthermore, if some biological fathers fear inadequate parental performance or appear incompetent to the mothers of their biological children, this hesitation might be even greater in such men who become stepfathers of other men's children.

The reality is that little research has focused on the person who stands in the center of the new stepfamily, the one with the closest emotional ties to both the children and the stepfather, the one who logically should be at the center of stepfamily research – the biological mother. The roles of stepfathers and their relationships with their stepchildren, the process of stepfamily formation, and the reasons for the success of many stepfamilies cannot be fully understood without further insight into the presence and impact of maternal gatekeeping within stepfamilies. Therefore, an important aspect of this study was its examination of maternal gatekeeping within the participating stepfamilies.

#### Mothers in Stepfamilies: A Gap in the Literature

Compared to the attention given to stepfathers and children/stepchildren, biological mothers in stepfamilies are virtually ignored in the literature. Mothers are most often found as the subjects of studies regarding divorced, single mothers, or are observed as one member of a couple in partnering with the new stepfather. This gap is surprising because over 30 years ago Bentler and Newcomb (1978) suggested that the wife's marital satisfaction in a stepfamily is

more predictive of the stability of the relationship than the level of satisfaction reported by the husband. One example of the on-going omission of the role of mother is that Visher and Visher, early pioneers in the field of stepfamily research, entitled their 1979 book, *Stepfamilies: A guide to working with stepparents and stepchildren*, yet failed to devote even a part of one chapter to the role of the biological mother in stepfamily life or formation. Similarly, Stewart's 2007 book, *Brave New Stepfamilies*, devotes *one* page to the biological mother, focusing almost exclusively on her parenting role between divorce and remarriage.

As powerful as maternal gatekeeping has been found to be in biological families, it could potentially be a major element in the formation of new stepfamilies, although it would likely result from very different sets of circumstances (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). The attitude of children's mothers toward stepfathers and their roles has been mentioned (Everett, 1998; Rosin, 1987) but only Weaver and Coleman (2002) have begun to address the gatekeeping role of the mother in stepfamilies. In their research, Weaver and Coleman found that biological mothers in stepfamilies adopt one or more of a combination of four protector roles, to varying degrees:

defender, gatekeeper, mediator, and interpreter. Women feel it is their responsibility to make sure the family gets along, and that, in a large part, is what guides this behavior.

The role of mother takes precedence over all other potential roles of genetic mothers in stepfamilies (p. 1).

With the series of changes in their lives, and possible on-going legal proceedings regarding custody and financial support of their children, divorced mothers typically have a strong sense of protectiveness regarding their children. New stepfathers may be perceived as the ones who need to be taught and monitored in relationship to any parental duties and responsibilities they may try to assume (Shopper, 2001). Although mothers' part in shaping

stepfathers' roles is largely ignored or taken for granted in the literature, it is certainly not because their roles are minimal. Shopper (2001) stated that:

The mother clearly possesses the power to deny the stepfather his role. It is the mother who will define and redefine over time the stepfather's role for him and her children.

Unless mother and stepfather are prepared to be united concerning the extent and power of the stepfather's right to discipline and otherwise parent her children, there will be no resolution of the issue and no peace in the family. For a stepfather to assume that he has disciplinary authority simply as a result of being married to the mother, or living in the home, or providing financial support, is simply a fantasy, albeit a common one among stepfathers (Shopper, 2001, p. 10-11).

As prospective stepfathers begin to build relationships with the children before marrying their mothers, and subsequently entering the family system, mothers serving as both gatekeepers and wives will play a significant role in the formation of their relationships (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). Cowdery and Knudson-Martin's (2005) research suggested that mothers may automatically attempt to manage stepfathers' relationships with their children, and may need to learn to allow them some measure of freedom in developing their relationships with their children.

In a study utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods, Fine et al. (1999) found that because biological mothers have an investment in their relationships with their children as well as their new husbands, mothers may be most sensitive to tension between them and will often find themselves striving to bring about harmonious relations between their children and their husbands. Unfortunately, they did not explain further how and when this might happen or the impact such behaviors could have upon the successful adjustment of the stepfamily.

In their writing about Family Systems Theory, Whitchurch and Constantine (1993) used the term “progressive centralization” to describe the process by which a person may serve as a change agent whereby a “particular component or subsystem (termed a leading part) becomes increasingly important in determining the behavior of the whole” (p. 336). This indicates that the biological mother’s behavior or attitude could impact the larger family system, effecting changes in the lives of other family members.

From a symbolic interactionist perspective mothers are the ones who will provide interaction and feedback in assisting their husbands in learning their new roles. Mothers will assist their children in forming their impressions of their new stepfathers and, to some extent, help them process their own feelings and reactions (Shopper, 2001). Proactive couples may choose to spend time with the children before, or immediately following, the beginning of cohabitation so that the children can feel like they have had input into the roles and rules within the new family (Coleman & Ganong, 1995; Golish, 2000)

Mothers serve as the primary connections with their children’s biological fathers, usually sharing co-parenting responsibilities. Although they cannot determine biological fathers and stepfathers’ reactions and attitudes toward each other, mothers can exert some influence upon them as well as their children. Mothers’ attitudes and comments expressed to the biological fathers, stepfathers, and children have the potential to impact how children will perceive their places in the various family systems, as well as how they perceive their new stepfathers and their places in their lives (Smith, 2004).

Another gap in the literature relates to how mothers’ relationships with their children’s fathers will affect the mothers expectations of their new partners (Stewart, 2007). Mothers will likely value those positive things their previous husbands did and will desire those behaviors to

be continued by their new husbands. Those behaviors and attitudes which mothers perceived as negative may cause mothers to be extra sensitive should their new partners attempt to act in a similar manner. Fathering identity, behaviors, and roles assumed are heavily influenced by mothers in intact nuclear families (Pasley, Dollahite, & Ihinger-Tallman, 1993; Shulman, Scharf, Lumer, & Maurer, 2001; Rane & McBride, 2000), and it could be true in stepfamilies as well.

### Summary

This review of the literature has covered four major areas related to stepfamily research. Relevant terms were identified and definitions selected in order to provide greater agreement and understanding in addressing the issues surrounding stepfamilies. Effective research is built upon theoretical foundations, and the concepts of three widely used theories – Social Learning Theory, Symbolic Interaction Theory, and Family Systems Theory – were described and their relevance to stepfamily research was explained. In addition, three often unacknowledged but widely used Deficit Perspectives were examined as well as their influence on research designs, methodologies, and interpretation of results.

A review of stepfather research included examining how stepfather adjustments and role formation, their attitudes and expectations as they enter into their stepfamilies and their marital relationships impact stepfathers' role satisfaction and their relationships with their stepchildren. A vast amount of research has been conducted regarding children and divorce as well as their adjustment to new stepfathers. A variety of factors affect that transition process, including the age and sex of the children, their mothers' mental health and their relationship with her.

With almost no research available regarding biological mothers in stepfamilies, research about mothers in biological, intact families was examined with particular attention given to maternal gatekeeping. Such gatekeeping still needs to be researched within stepfamilies. The gap

in the literature concerning mothers and their involvement in assisting their husbands and children adapt and adjust throughout the process of stepfamily formation was discussed.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study attempts to discover, explore, and gain greater understanding of the experiences of stepfamilies who consider themselves successful in their adjustment to stepfamily life. This study was phenomenological in nature because its purpose was to better understand how stepfamilies “make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). Two stepfamilies from the Midwest were chosen to share in the process of discovery. Interviews were conducted and the data was analyzed in order to gain insights informing further study regarding the role of biological mothers in helping the members of their stepfamilies in their adjustments to each other.

### Qualitative Methodology Rationale

With the stepfamily becoming an increasingly common but often unstable family form, (Amato, 2001) there is a sense of importance in undertaking applied research to gain insight and perspectives into how some stepfamilies adjust successfully. A large number of studies have examined stepfamilies, especially focusing on stepfathers and stepchildren, but few focused on how biological mothers help their new husbands successfully integrate into the family. Furthermore, many researchers have focused on the effects of parental divorce and remarriage upon children, but usually from adults’ perspectives; few have sought children’s perspectives (Koerner, Rankin, Kenyon, & Korn, 2004; Ritala-Koskinen, 1997). This relative dearth of research from the perspective of biological mothers and their children made qualitative enquiry the methodology of choice to give voice to an otherwise largely silenced population.

“Qualitative methods permit inquiry into selected issues in great depth with attention to detail, context, and nuance (Patton, 2002, p. 129). They further facilitate making sense of

experience and transforming experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning (Patton), which in these cases was the family's adjustment as a stepfamily.

This study was designed to discover the factors utilized by respondent families in achieving what they described as being successful stepfamilies. With relatively little known about this process through the available literature, there was little upon which to build a survey or to give direction to the construction of predetermined categories for analysis, making a quantitative approach unsuitable (Everett, 1998; Silverman, 2000). An inductive, naturalistic inquiry strategy without predetermined hypotheses, a strength of qualitative methods (Patton, 2002), allowed family members to tell their own stories and make their own associations in their own words. The various details they shared, each unique to their perceptions and the meanings they attach to their experiences, led to increased understanding of the families experiences. It also assisted in developing a more complete and holistic picture of the events and processes that took place as the families adjusted over time (Silverman, 2000).

#### Phenomenological Approach

Far from being a single type of inquiry, qualitative research encompasses a broad range of perspectives and approaches, a variety of which could have been successfully employed in this search for new insights. I chose to use a phenomenological approach because the purpose of phenomenological inquiry is to discover meaning within the lived experiences of the participants (Patton, 2002). White and Klein (2002) observed that phenomenology has received the "greatest attention and application in the work of family scholars" of all the postpositivist schools of thought (p. 73). Meaning making is one of the core attributes or essences of being human (Patton), and the world in which we live is formed and informed by our individual senses, perceptions and interpretations of life's events.

Two people may share the same experience, but with differing perceptions and previous life experiences through which to filter it, they may reach two very different interpretations. In order to gain the greatest amount of insight into the meaning of their stepfamily experiences, both parents and children were given the opportunity to share their memories, perceptions, and the meanings they had constructed. This deviated from the practice of most researchers (Ritala-Koskinen, 1997), and the children's observations and experiences added greatly to my understanding of the formation process of their successful stepfamilies.

This was congruent with Koerner and colleagues (2004) who noted that mothers and their children "experience the mothers' repartnering from quite different perspectives and with different relational needs and goals. Mothers experience re-partnering as a romantic adult who is gaining a partner but who also must maintain harmony in her existing family system"(p. 27). Her children "experience their mothers' repartnering as a child with a potential parent figure entering their day-to-day world as well as the world of their mother" (p. 27). They went on to express surprise that "scholars have not taken a 'divergent realities' approach to the study of maternal repartnering" (p. 27). In a phenomenological approach, differences and discrepancies are not considered measurement errors, but rather legitimate expressions of the multiple realities, perspectives and meanings of the participants (Patton, 2002). Therefore, a phenomenological approach to the study of successful stepfamily formation allowed the participants freedom of expression while enabling the researcher to give adequate consideration to all realities voiced.

### Theoretical Perspectives

Because perspective shapes and even creates one's reality, it was vital that I deliberately select and own the choice of theoretical lenses through which I viewed the issues, the participants, and the subsequent process of data analysis. As noted in the previous chapter,

stepfamilies have been viewed over the years through several theoretical lenses. While each has merit and has contributed to the literature, two were especially beneficial in informing my methodology and analysis: symbolic interactionism and family systems theory.

### *Symbolic Interaction Theory*

The symbolic interaction framework is especially valuable in a phenomenological study, because phenomenology is widely utilized by family researchers, and specifically has found its philosophical “home” within the “framework of symbolic interaction” (White & Klein, 2002, p. 75).

One of the major uses of symbolic interaction theory currently is in the area of family life education...It is the belief of family life educators that by establishing more realistic expectations and enhancing the skills needed in family life, families will become more stable and healthy. This perspective fits well with the basic notions of symbolic interaction (White & Klein, 2002, p. 81).

Symbolic interaction theory stresses that each person’s identity incorporates a number of different social roles, the meanings and performance of which the individual discovers and develops through her/his interactions with others (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993; White & Klein, 2002). These roles and their meanings affect how the person acts or behaves in various situations and contexts, changing and adapting over time as the individual faces new social settings and situations. “How we define the situation in which we find ourselves explains what problems we define and what actions and solutions we undertake” (White & Klein, p. 64). Many men entering into the role of stepfather are already engaged in the role of father to their own biological children, and then are faced with the construction of a new role that will meet the needs of their new wives and their stepchildren. The more roles a person attempts to occupy, the “less

consensus the person will perceive in the expectations about these roles” (Burr, Leigh, Day, & Constantine, 1979 as cited in White & Klein, 2002, p. 70).

From this theoretical perspective, stepfathers’ construction and performance of their roles will have a major influence on the happiness and overall adjustment of their stepfamilies (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993; White & Klein, 2002). Although one might assume that people with normal social skills will already possess the elements necessary for developing spousal and parental roles, the role of stepfather is exceptional and must be defined in the context of each (unique) new family unit. “By definition, the stepfather is an anomaly, a new figure whose place in the psychological world is largely defined in relationship to the absent father” (Galatzer-Levy, 2001, p. 128).

Lack of clarity and/or consensus in defining roles can create dissonance within the individual and his/her new family, leading to role strain and overload (White & Klein, 2002). Each person performs a number of roles largely defined by the family and society, with internal and external rewards and pressures to enact them in an acceptable manner. Because the lack of definition and ambiguity of roles seem to be the “hallmark” of stepfamilies (Bray, 1994), they (and stepfathers in particular) find themselves facing unclear expectations, reduced relational satisfaction, and increased role strain.

Fine and colleagues (1997) noted that a social role such as that of stepfather has at least two dimensions, a “cognitive dimension” and a “behavioral dimension”. The stepfather’s new role and identity will develop from a variety of sources including past experiences and personal conceptions of the role, and especially through interactions with his wife and her children. His expectations, perceptions, and learned roles will ultimately be effective, reinforced, and

replicated as they approach meeting the expectations, perceptions, and even the approval of his wife and the positive responsiveness of her children (Roberts & Price, 1987; White & Klein, 2002).

While previous research has examined other's perceptions of the effects of divorce on children, few studies have sought out children's perspectives on their relationships with their stepfathers. Symbolic interaction theory indicates that children will learn about, and adjust to, new roles within the stepfamily. Like the stepfather, the children have a new relationship to begin to define and understand, as well as additional roles to learn and perform. Because society has yet to provide a normative role for stepfamilies (and stepchildren in particular) (Cherlin, 1978), the children will define and perform their new roles based on overt as well as subliminal cues received from others, especially their mothers.

Just as symbolic interaction theory may help one understand what leads to a successful stepfamily, so it also can help explain what may lead to the dissolution of stepfamilies. Burr and colleagues (1979) proposed that "the greater the perceived role strain that results from performing a role, the less the ease in making a transition into the role and the greater the ease in making a transition out of the role" (p. 86). If at least part of the definition of successful stepfamilies is that they endure, then understanding the relevance of this proposition is of great importance. Using deductive reasoning, the greater the ease with which stepfathers transition into their roles, the greater the likelihood the marital relationship will endure. Conversely, stepfathers may not be consciously aware of ongoing frustration with role strain and role overload, and thus perceive that people (i.e. their stepchildren) or other issues and problems that arise are the reasons for his dissatisfaction. This proposition logically leads full circle back to the earlier

proposition that the “quality of (a person’s) role enactment in a relationship positively affects ego’s satisfaction with the relationship” (Burr, et al., 1979, p. 70).

Symbolic interaction theory was useful in helping me understand the adaptation and role learning of not only stepfathers but their stepchildren, and emphasized the critical roles biological mothers have in their influence upon both their new husbands and their children. The methodology utilized assisted in extracting and explicating the meanings and role formation that occurred throughout the formation of the stepfamily, keeping each of the role players and his/her interactions in focus.

### *Family Systems Theory*

Family systems theory views each member of the family as part of an interdependent system, within which each one emotionally relates and interacts with the others. Individuals are connected and interconnected in various groupings, forming subsystems within the larger family system. A system is defined by its boundaries, which “refers to system or subsystem rules that define not only who is in a specific relationship but also what tasks and functions will be performed within that relationship” (Ganong & Coleman, 1994, p. 63). A system cannot be fully understood by examining only its individual parts, but rather only when it is seen as a whole system encompassing all the various elements. This helps explain how a change in one individual or subsystem will impact the system as a whole (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993).

Once in place, a system “works” for those involved – providing structure, stability, and balance, remaining in that formation and performing those functions for its members. Depending on a variety of factors, including the health (or functionality) of the system, boundaries can range from rigid to porous. Thus attempts on the part of an outsider to enter the system, or an insider to change in some manner, are met with resistance and, at least initially, are functionally rejected.

Following divorce, a binuclear system is created (Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987), with mother and her biological children and the father and his biological children forming new systems. What was one system becomes two following divorce, with the children part of both systems. One of the primary tasks of the individuals who formerly comprised the parental system is to redefine tasks, roles, and relationships with the children and each other (Ahrons & Wallisch). Following divorce, the members of the mother/children family system will begin to form a new sense of identity and boundaries, and may start achieving some sense of “normalcy” for the participants.

However, in time most women remarry and their new husbands will attempt to enter their family systems, potentially triggering a great deal of systemic disequilibrium. Some degree of dissonance and discomfort may result, especially if the systems are truly binuclear and the biological fathers are still involved with their children. Although mothers and their ex-husbands are legally divorced, the binuclear family systems created through the process of separation and divorce still function to some degree. In other words, biological fathers are still involved in the family systems and affect various aspects of the lives of those forming new stepfamily systems. As part of the on-going binuclear family system, biological fathers can still have pronounced influences on their ex-wives, their children, and to some degree even upon new stepfathers.

The fact that the original family system, even though now binuclear, still continues to function to some degree can cause confusion in attempting to understand stepfamilies (Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987). The mother–children family system may not necessarily accept a new stepfather, even though he has legally married into the family (Shopper, 2001). In some stepfamilies the children do not necessarily perceive their stepparent as being part of the family

(Bray & Kelly, 1998). Family systems can functionally include and exclude people who would be perceived otherwise by those outside the family (Klee, Schmidt, & Johnson, 1989).

Family systems theory informed the methodology of this study in gathering as well as in the analysis and interpretation of the data. It was especially critical in sensitizing the researcher to the early adjustments of the mother/child(ren) subsystem as boundaries were re-forming at the same time that at least theoretically the system was doing its best to maintain homeostasis.

### Research Questions

After examining the literature one can see that the formation of a successful stepfamily is multifaceted, and that one of the most obvious facets, the role of the biological mother, has yet to be intentionally examined. Through the theoretical lenses of symbolic interactionism and family systems theory, the role of the mother in the inclusion of the stepfather and the formation of a new familial system appears to be critical. Therefore, the overarching research question in this study was, “What is the mother’s role in facilitating the relationship between the stepfather and her biological child(ren) in successful stepfamily formation?” The following specific questions gave direction in interviewing participants and in analyzing the data:

1. What makes this stepfamily successful? What is the role of the mother in its success?
2. What challenges did the family face in forming a successful family?
3. What is the relationship between the stepfather and child? What was the role of the mother in facilitating this relationship?
4. How has/does the biological father influence(d) this process?

To gain greater insight into each of these questions, survey questions were prepared and used as guidelines for the interviews with each participant, and are found in Appendix B.

## Participants

Two stepfamilies from the Midwestern region of the United States were included in this study. They met the qualifications for participation: they included a divorced and re-married mother, her husband and at least one child residing in the home. Because the selected families have directly experienced the formation of a successful stepfamily, they also met the qualifications for inclusion in a phenomenological study, which according to Patton (2002) requires that they have “*directly* experienced the phenomenon of interest; that is, they have ‘lived experience’ as opposed to secondhand experience” (p. 104, emphasis his).

Families were selected through a sampling procedure best described as “purposive” or “judgmental” sampling in an effort to obtain *information-rich cases* that would facilitate in-depth study (Babbie, 1998; Patton, 2002). Families were chosen to participate as partners in discovery based upon their experiences in creating successful stepfamilies (Cowdery & Knudson-Martin, 2005; Silverman, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For a family to be deemed successful for the purposes of this study, the participants needed to: 1) have been married for at least five years, and 2) be able to describe themselves as successful.

A minimum of five years of marriage was chosen because research indicates that typically it takes remarried families two to four years to adjust after a remarriage or relationship transition (Bray, 1999; Hetherington, 1987), with the average length of second marriages being five years (Bray, 1999). Five years was deemed to be sufficient time for the families to develop a sense that this relationship will work, while allowing the participating children to be old enough to retain memories of life before and after the remarriage/repartnering.

Participants were selected from referrals by colleagues. Families identified as potential participants were initially contacted by telephone with an invitation to participate in this study.

They were given a verbal synopsis of the study and an explanation of what would be involved. Both families contacted responded affirmatively and interview dates and locations were scheduled.

Participating families were simple stepfamilies with only the children of the mothers having primary residence in the home (at least 50% of the time), with one couple also having a biological child of their own in residence. Neither stepfather had any biological children from previous relationships. Both mothers and one stepfather had been married previously. (For a listing of participants and their respective relationships, see Appendix B).

Family A consists of mother Anna and her 14-year-old daughter Annette. Anna was married to Annette's father Arnold for eight years, but when Annette was 2-years-old, her parents peacefully ended their marriage as friends. Three years after the divorce, Anna married Alan, who had also recently gone through a divorce. Two years later Anna gave birth to their daughter Alisha. Arnold has always been very involved in Annette's life. He currently lives two miles away from her, and is considered by everyone to be a member of the family.

Family B was formed under different circumstances. Betty and Boris decided to divorce when their son Brian was 18 months old. Betty subsequently lived with her parents while pursuing her college education. During this time she met Bob, and a year later they decided to cohabit. They were married approximately three years later. Brian is now 14, and it has only been in the past few years that he has had consistent contact with Boris.

#### Procedure

This study utilized in-depth individual interviews of each family member as the primary data gathering methodology. This allowed participants to give their own unique expressions to

their experiences, providing hundreds of pages of transcribed data to examine and mine for information and insight.

### *Interviews*

Interviews were conducted in sites chosen by the families, places that were comfortable for the participants and that ensured a high probability of privacy. In Family A, most of the interviews were conducted in their home, in areas somewhat isolated from other family members. Family B chose to be interviewed in a meeting room in a public library. Every effort was made to ensure the participants' comfort and minimize distractions.

Three questionnaires were prepared to serve as guidelines for the interviews – questions for the mothers, the stepfathers, and the children (See Appendix A). A semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was used in order to allow participants to respond in ways that reflected their experiences in their own language, without being “pigeon-holed into standardized categories” (Patton, 2002, p. 56). It was explained to all participants that while the researchers were using a printed interview guide, additional questions might arise for clarification or to elicit further information. This methodology allowed freedom of expression to all persons involved in the study, and enabled researchers to ask unscripted questions (Patton, 2002).

I was assisted in the interviews by a co-researcher as we interacted with the participants, took notes and made written observations. We alternated roles during the interviews, with one serving as primary investigator and taking the lead asking questions, while the other person operated recording equipment, and wrote down impressions, observations, and as much description as possible. Care was taken to be thorough, for as Silverman (2000) noted, the very act of taking field notes is an initial phase of data analysis.

Participants were informed that questions would be asked regarding their past experiences and current perspectives. Family members were told that there were no right or wrong answers, they did not need to answer any question they did not want to answer or with which they were uncomfortable, and that they could withdraw from participation at any time. We sought and received permission from each person to use video and audio recorders to ensure accurate recording of their answers. It was explained that the recordings, and the subsequent transcripts, would be used for analytical purposes only, and that no one outside the research team would see or hear them.

Ideally, all members of both families should have been interviewed since divorcing couples with children represent on-going, binuclear families, and results of this study indicated that biological fathers continue to impact the formation of stepfamilies. However, including the biological father would have been possible in only one of the participating families in this study, and such a criterion would have served to eliminate participation by the other family. Therefore, individual “in-depth, open-ended interviews” (Patton, 2002, p. 4) were conducted with mothers, their current husbands, and their biological children residing in their homes. The separate interviews provided a variety of perspectives, thereby increasing accuracy and credibility. Children’s responses to questions describing their experiences within their stepfamilies provided a different perspective and greater breadth than would have been obtained from interviewing only the adults. At the conclusion of each interview, clarifying questions were asked by both researchers, and opportunity was given for the respondent to ask questions or make additional comments.

All information gathered from the participants during the interviews was the data used for analysis in this study. After each family was interviewed, transcriptionists were engaged to

transcribe the interviews. By reading over my observational notes, listening to the audio recordings, watching the video recordings, and reading over the transcripts, my goal was to gain the greatest possible understanding of each person's responses and how they perceived their lived experiences. As described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), this helped ensure that concepts and categories that were identified were actually "grounded" in individual cases and their individual experiences.

### *Analysis*

Bryman asserted that "qualitative research follows a theoretical, rather than a statistical, logic: 'the issues should be couched in terms of the generalizability of cases to theoretical propositions rather than to populations or universes'" (cited in Silverman, 2000, p. 105, emphasis his). The purpose of this study was to analyze and evaluate the data as a first step toward the development of hypotheses and possibly even models and theories which will help to guide future research into successful stepfamily formation.

Data were analyzed using cross-case analysis. The transcribed responses were read and reread, allowing the data to speak for itself. Eventually categories used by the respondents to bring meaning to their experiences began to emerge. This was done first within individuals, then within familial dyads – mother/stepfather, mother/child, and stepfather/child then within family. Once within family analyses were completed, analysis was done between families, looking for commonalities and unique expressions or experiences.

As patterns and themes emerged within and then between cases, the tentative construction of overarching categories and patterns began (Patton, 2002). However, care was taken throughout the process that the ultimate purpose was not to construct categories and

determine which results fit into each category, but rather to discover the categories around which the participants arranged and constructed their lives and experiences (Silverman, 2000).

Following the interviews, my co-researcher and I began the process of analysis. I recruited an additional colleague to assist us with reading and analyzing the transcripts. After individually classifying and categorizing the data, we compared and contrasted our findings with each other and discussed and refined the categories identified.

### *Triangulation*

Triangulation was used in various forms to make this study as reliable as possible. Patton (2002) defined triangulation as “the attempt to get a ‘true’ fix on a situation by combining different ways of looking at it or different findings” (p. 177) and described it as “ideal” (Patton, p. 247). Denzin wrote,

*The logic of triangulation is based on the premise that no single method ever adequately solves the problem of causal factors. Because each method reveals different aspects of empirical reality, multiple methods of observations must be employed. This is termed triangulation. I now offer as a final methodological rule the principle that multiple methods should be used in every investigation (1978, cited in Patton, 2002, p. 247).*

In this study, the use of a variety of data sources provided data triangulation (Patton, 2002). This included interviews with multiple persons, written, descriptive field notes and observations made during interviews as well as from the audio and video tapes. The accuracy of verbal responses was greatly enhanced by using both audio and video taping of the interviews.

As previously described, this study also utilized investigator triangulation, which involves using more than one person, preferably a team, to do the research as well as data analysis (Patton, 2002). Three researchers worked independently at reading through and studying the transcriptions of the interviews and doing the analysis. Preliminary results were discussed

and evaluated. This provided some measure of independence as well as interdependence in the development of the categories and results.

This study also used theoretical triangulation, which is the use of more than one theoretical perspective to help view and interpret the data set (Patton, 2002). Symbolic interactionism and family systems theory are the underpinnings of this entire study and provided two different, and yet complementary, lenses through which the data were viewed. Symbolic interaction theory sensitized us to the meanings of the roles assumed by each participant. Family systems theory assisted us in probing beneath the surface to try to understand the reasons and purposes for the inter-relational dynamics between and among the members of the families.

#### The Role of the Researcher

Since the “quality of the information obtained during an interview is largely dependent on the interviewer” (Patton, 2002, p. 341), it was important for the integrity of the research that I remain as self-aware as possible so as to minimize my bias throughout the process. I have an innate belief that people should be given opportunity and empowered to speak for themselves, to have the opportunity to portray their situation and life experiences in words of their own choosing. I viewed this study as a process of mutual learning and discovery, with the participants serving as co-researchers, whereas even the most carefully worded survey would have only allowed them to choose from options I had identified previously.

I have worked with over 200 divorcees through a divorce recovery ministry in a large Protestant, interdenominational church in the Midwest. I have observed the pain and grief that can accompany divorce, not only for the nuclear family affected, but for the larger extended context of family, friends, and coworkers. I also observed the joys and happiness that comes when divorcees remarry and feel they have found a compatible partner, and through the joys and

challenges build successful families. By interviewing people for this study who were strangers to me, I was able to engage in the interviews without becoming involved emotionally.

It is my observation that the more discontinuous relationships one experiences, the greater the compounded stresses will be. I believe that interventive programs can be effective, that educational steps can be taken to help the re-coupling to work and be more successful than it would have been without the intervention. Suggestions for practitioners were developed as a result of this study, and I intend to develop them further so that they can be implemented in training programs for stepfamilies. However, the participants in this study helped me realize that there is a lot more to stepfamilies succeeding than education alone.

In my role as the primary instrument of measurement (Patton, 2002), my personal beliefs and previous experiences impacted this study. First, I have a lifelong basic bias that it is best for everyone, especially children, if marriages endure and successfully meet the on-going needs of the family members. As a result of observing numerous people develop new, fulfilling relationships following divorce, I came to a greater realization that while the ideal is for marriages to work and families remain intact, there can be happiness and success in a stepfamily situation.

In addition, I brought an empathic sensitivity to the emotional, relational and developmental stages of the participants. With my extensive experience in working with divorced individuals, I believe I was able to ask pertinent, insightful questions of the participants. Having an interview guide helped me to stay on track throughout the interview process. I greatly benefited from having a trusted colleague (who is also a licensed marriage and family therapist) assist me in the interviewing and analysis aspects of the study.

This study had the potential of bringing up unpleasant events, emotions, and issues for the participants. Aware of the possibility that one or more participants might experience the interview process in a negative way, the following precautions were implemented in an attempt to minimize that possibility:

1. Participants knew in advance the subject of our research, and the general content of our questions. They were strongly encouraged to not participate if there they had any misgivings or apprehension.
2. Although no time table can be placed upon the healing process, in general healing does occur over time, and what may have been unpleasant or painful at the time becomes a memory, rather than an emotional jolt.
3. Participants were reminded that they were free to disengage at any time from the study.
4. Every effort was made to be observant and sensitive to emotive feedback from the participants, especially the children.

#### Summary

Although the divorce rate has been stable and even declining for several years, second and subsequent marriages are still at particularly high risk for dissolution (Amato, 2001). I am concerned about the impact this can have on the children involved, and believe that more of those second (and higher order) marriages might have been successful if they had had more information or been aware of other options in their process of adjustment and adaptation. Rather than cast aspersions or view stepfamilies from a deficit perspective, as a family life educator my desire is to further assist those contemplating re-partnering in making informed decisions. Thus discovering further aspects of what helps stepfamilies adjust successfully is very important to me both personally and professionally.

Therefore, my study utilized a qualitative, phenomenological methodology in which I interviewed two stepfamilies which had been together for over eight years, and described themselves as successful. Interviews were conducted with all members of both families using interview guides, with participants' responses recorded for later transcription. Symbolic interaction and family systems theories provided the lenses through which cross-case analysis was conducted.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Qualitative, cross-case analysis of the data revealed several themes surrounding the formation and success of the stepfamilies in this study. Symbolic Interaction Theory and Family Systems Theory provided the lenses through which the data was viewed, and the research questions provided the framework upon which the resulting themes are displayed. Some of the quotes are intentionally repeated because they address more than one issue, reflecting the integral nature of the themes identified. (For a brief overview of participants' names and familial relationships, see Appendix B).

### Research Question 1:

What Makes This Stepfamily Successful? What is the Role of the Mother in its Success?

While phrased as two separate questions, the first research question serves to bring together the foci of this study – successful stepfamilies and mothers. The families in this study were informed prior to their participation that their input would be valuable because they were considered to be successful. When asked for their definitions of success, their answers reflected the strengths that would be echoed throughout the course of their interviews.

### *Definition of Success*

The purpose of this study was to discover and examine what makes some stepfamilies successful. The initial criteria used for defining success were duration of the marriage (at least five years) and in addition, the families identified themselves as successful stepfamilies. Three elements emerged as participants described the reasons for their success – emotional caring, duration of the relationship, and lack of major conflict. Betty described her family as successful because *“we all care for each other and we're still together, so I think that's probably a success”*.

In defining his family's success, Alan repeatedly used the phrase "get along" in reference to a lack of familial conflict:

*Just getting along with everyone - we're successful in that we haven't raised major arguments between one another. I mean we do have issues that come up but I've seen other families have problems, and I'd say that we might be a little above average (Laughs). Trying to figure out the right way to do things, not to be hateful to one another, but to get along.*

Bob's definition of success as a family was incorporated in describing his perception of being a success in his role as stepfather: "If I'm a success at this it's because I never forced myself upon him (Brian). And I think seeing other stepparents out there that's the mistake that I see them making." Anna responded in a similar manner, addressing success from the perspective of relationships and involvement:

*It takes all of us so I don't want to shine the light on me without shining the light on them to say, even though I'm intentional about language and can see the respect, it really does take all of us to be the receivers of that as well with each other. I think there's been a lot of good things and helping things that come out of this, but even the children, it's taken all of us to make it work.*

#### *Contributors to Success*

In addition to the core elements participants identified in their definitions of success, four dominant themes emerged as primary contributors to their overall success as stepfamilies. The themes they articulated were intentional communication, a positive perspective and sense of identity, flexibility/adaptability, and lack of conflict among family members. These themes were interwoven throughout the responses of all participants, similar to the threads of a tapestry.

#### *Communication*

Consistent, intentional communication, especially on the part of the mother, was the predominant theme and appeared to be an integral part of the success of these stepfamilies. Due

to the multi-faceted nature of communication in these families, it will be presented in a variety of contexts and time periods.

*Mother-stepfather dyad.* Premarital communication – In these families the pattern of communication before marriage was described as predominantly informal and reactive rather than proactive. None of the adults could recall initiating specific conversations regarding parental or partnership expectations before they married, but it became evident that informal conversations were frequent as issues arose in the relationship.

The one exception to the lack of formal premarital communication of expectations was an intentional coaching of Alan by Anna as to the strong friendship that remained between her and her ex-husband, Arnold. She remembers proactively informing him of the nature of their on-going friendship in order to allay the possibility of future misunderstanding.

*I did coach him when we started dating on what Arnold's and my relationship was like so that he wouldn't go through any jealous path or feel like there was some other hidden agenda with Arnold because he's very amicable. And so I did coach him in that respect.*

For Bob and Betty, premarital communication consisted primarily of informal conversations that revolved around negative patterns in her first marriage that she did not want repeated and relationships they observed in the media.

*I don't think it was just, you know, we sat down one day, 'This is what I expect of you'. I think it was just, you know, talking about other couples and saying, 'I can't believe the stepfather is the one who is being the disciplinarian when you know the mother is not doing anything.' Or watching a show and discussing it. I think it was more me complaining about my ex-husband and, 'I hated this', and "don't you ever do that" is probably how I made my expectations clear. I think that honestly whining and complaining about my ex is probably how I conveyed my expectations.*

The couples also discussed the mothers' role expectations of the stepfathers prior to their union which included delineating the boundaries for disciplining the children. Betty recalled that these expectations were in place

*by the time we got married I knew I didn't want him to be abusive or put down Brian and I think it was probably very clear that, 'You know there are certain things – you don't hurt Brian in any way.*

Similarly, Bob could only recall one specific pre-marital expectation of Betty as a parent:

*Not to be babying him. 'Cause when I first met them she would baby him, severely, and I had to make her stop. She didn't want any physical punishment like spanking and things like that and I had to deal with (it). That's not my belief, but something I had to go by.*

Alan remembered that,

*(Discipline) was one thing I kind of remember she commented on. She liked the way I did (emphasized) discipline or whatever. We talked about how we were brought up so we kind of knew how I felt about things and how she felt about disciplining and stuff like that. You see other people's kids and how they are being disciplined and think, 'Oh man, that ain't the right way'. Or 'I can't believe they let them get away with that stuff.'*

*Post-marital communication.* While the couples informally addressed some issues and topics before their marriages, communication improved after they married. Bob noted, "As we've gone along we talk about things more now than we used to." Post-marital communication flows freely for these couples, and can best be described as intentional, united in front of the child(ren), and positive.

*Intentional.* The mothers reported continuing to work on improving post-marital family communication. For example, Anna stated,

*Without a doubt, I've been real intentional with my language with him (Alan) and with Arnold (ex-husband) as well. And I watch my language with both of them. Because I think that's where it starts – that's where*

*arguments start, and that's where misunderstandings begin. And so, if I can nail that down, then I think it's easy going. So, you know, I've worked very hard at that over the years. I practice conversations!*

*United in front of the children.* In addressing disciplinary issues, the parents emphasized making a determined effort to not undermine each other's parental actions in front of the children, even though they may disagree with how the other one handles a certain situation.

Betty recounted their on-going adjustment and efforts to be supportive of each other:

*I think in the beginning he (Bob) was willing to question my parenting skills in front of Brian. Now, we kind of have the rule that we will let the other parent vent or whatever, and then we will question them away from Brian. Not to undermine their parenting skills. We've always tried to have a united front when we face Brian so he doesn't play us against each other. And I mean you are keeping a relationship with your husband, (so) you know you can't undermine him, you can't put him down in front of the kids.*

As a stepfather, Alan expressed appreciation for the way he and Anna support each other in parenting Annette.

*I guess that's the other thing too is backing each other up. Because I can say something, about what Annette's doing or shouldn't be doing. Annette's saying, 'Naw, I can do this,' but Anna will pipe up and say, 'No that's not right', you know.*

*Positive communication.* Just as the couples strive to be supportive of each other in front of their children, a prominent characteristic of the communication patterns of these families is their conscious effort to keep communication positive when it relates to the biological father. The mothers repeatedly expressed the firm conviction that conversation about the biological father, especially in front of the child, should be positive, and they repeatedly used the phrase "bite my tongue" in attempting to maintain that standard.

In discussing her ex-husband and his relationship to her son, Betty stated,

*A lot of it is just listening and biting my tongue, that I don't go, 'Right, and I can tell you eight hundred million other things wrong with him!' Because that's one thing I've always tried to do as much as possible is not to bad mouth my ex – we try not to do it in front of Brian.*

Betty further commented on the connection she sees between maintaining a positive relationship with her son and what she and the stepfather may say about the biological father.

*I think the most important thing that Bob and I have learned throughout this whole thing (in order) to maintain a positive relationship with Brian is not to bad mouth the ex. Because whether or not Bob likes it, whenever you attack a kid's parent even if it is a stepfather, or a biological father who is, you know a bum on the street or whatever, that's fifty percent of their DNA and kids feel like that's fifty percent of me.*

Anna repeatedly emphasized positive, intentional communication as the primary factor in their success as a stepfamily.

*Establishing respect through intentional verbiage has been paramount for all of us. You know, I think that if you ask me what I've done, that's what I think I've done is really kind of set that tone and say we are not going to dog anybody for doing what they think they need to do.*

This has resulted in a close relationship between her former and current husbands. Alan stated, "That's where me and Arnold (ex-husband) can come in (to talk to Anna). That's one thing Anna tries to work on, that we get along." Then laughing, he added, "Sometimes we'll gang up on her."

Perhaps the importance of positive communication was best summarized by Anna when she stated,

*It takes many years to blend, and blend well. So don't expect it to happen overnight. Listen to your words and your language and how you speak to each other. Ask yourself if they are words of honor, or if they are words of discredit, discrediting someone.*

*Mother –Child Dyad*

Post-divorce, the mother-child subsystem shares a history through which there have been experiences shared, attitudes shaped, roles established, and emotional ties built. This system is confronted by on-going challenges to adapt and adjust to changing circumstances. It was clear that the mothers in this study used conversation to help prepare their children for the coming of the stepfather into their family.

*Premarital.* Although the children in this study were relatively young when their mothers considered remarriage, their mothers spent time talking with them before the wedding about the meaning of marriage and what the children might expect afterward. Anna recalled:

*(I was) real intentional with (Annette) about maintaining her role with her father. That didn't have to change, he would always be there, and I would always be there in terms of what she had in her dad. Alan was not here to replace Arnold, but he is a member of our family. And that he was going to be her stepdad so he would have some authority over her.*

*Postmarital.* The amount and effectiveness of communication between the mothers and their children increased over the years. Even though the children are now in their teens, and are actively involved with their peers, communication with their mothers remains consistently positive. One mother expressed pleasure that she can be "a parent that kids can come to without hesitation", while another said, "I feel honored that she can come to me and tell me things I would never tell my mother."

Annette and Brian both expressed ease and comfort in talking with their mothers, and noted that most of their conversations at home were with their mothers. Although the children expressed no hesitation about talking to their stepfathers, they did mention that there was little opportunity due to the amount of time the fathers work away from the home. Brian stated,

*I mean both of my relationships with my mom and my stepdad are pretty strong. But, I usually tell my mom things first. I honestly don't know if that's because of the relationship or it's 'cause she's kind of there first.*

*Stepfather-Child Dyad.* Though the stepfathers are often gone from the home due to work and business responsibilities, they do strive to communicate with their stepchildren. Betty described her perceptions of her son's and husband's communication efforts:

*I mean there's a lot of things he'll tell Bob that he won't tell me, but it also happens vice versa, some things he'll tell me but not tell Bob. But there is still a lot of kind of personal, you know, boy feelings, feelings for girls that he talks more with Bob than he does with me.*

Brian acknowledged the role his mother plays in facilitating his communication with his stepfather: *"It's usually something my mom will be like, 'Alright but you need to tell your dad', or vice versa, you know. They won't tell each other, but they'll make me tell 'em."* Betty acknowledged encouraging her husband and son to talk.

*Sometimes I'm a little bit of a busy body, but (I say), 'You're going to need to talk to him about this' – to both parties. I'm usually the one who gets off work first, so a lot of the times I am the one who picks up Brian and he'll sit there and tell me everything that happened during his day. And then in the evening I try to get Brian to basically repeat it all for Bob so Bob doesn't feel like Brian and I are this special little clique and that he doesn't even know anything that is going on.*

For Annette, conversation with her stepfather rarely happens except as part of family activities shared by all. She said,

*I never really do spend time alone with Alan. I used to when Alisha wasn't here 'cause it was just me, him, and my mom. And then if my mom wasn't home, it'd just be me and him home. (Now) we usually end up, me and Alisha and Alan playing a board game or something.*

### *Positive Identity*

In addition to using positive communication, these families shared a strong sense of familial identity, held positive perspectives of themselves as families, and expressed a solid

commitment to one another. This positive sense of being family began early in the marital relationships and is perhaps now most keenly expressed by the children.

*We are family.* While all participants acknowledged challenges typical of living in a stepfamily relationship, and the children spend regular time living with parents in two households, these families do not think of themselves as stepfamilies – they are families. For example, when asked how her son has adjusted to living in a stepfamily configuration, Betty responded,

*I think very well because we've always kind of viewed ourselves as a family and not as a couple and one member of that couple had a kid. I think in a way we just kind of ignored the fact that Bob was the stepfather and just kind of – he was the father!*

Brian echoed that perception when asked to describe how he feels when he sees his mom and stepdad together. He responded *"Perfectly fine. It's just kind of like someone would see their mom and dad together. It's just normal to me, though, it's not really a stepfamily it's just my normal family."*

*Commitment.* All but one of the adults participating in this study had been divorced previous to this marriage, and all expressed a strong determination to not allow it to happen again. Bob, the only one for whom this is a first marriage, repeatedly emphasized his commitment to marriage, regardless of problems that may arise:

*I'm kind of throwing (divorce) out – you know I was raised in a family to where if there's problems – there's always problems, and you can't quit. Big thing these days when you have problems you just get divorced instead of you work them out.*

Betty saw Bob's willingness to financially support her and her small son as tangible evidence of his overall commitment.

*(Finances were) something we eased into. It was before we were married when we opened up his (Brian's) college account. In the beginning we were putting in \$25.00 a month, but that is something we did together when we weren't married. So that's kind of a big sign of financial commitment.*

Anna acknowledged the challenges that inevitably arise in a "blended family", and stressed the need for commitment to make it work.

*It takes many years to blend, and blend well. So don't expect it to happen overnight. Just know that it's gonna take the trials to make your family stronger and that with each trial, you have to sit back and learn from it. You can't just say, 'Oh, that was terrible! I'm going to hit a bump in the road and go right off and get divorced again because this isn't going to work'. Because there are too many personalities, there are too many other factors that come into a blended family that you don't expect and you just kind of have to deal with it as they come and know that those will make you stronger.*

*Positive perspective – "something close to proud".* While the term stepfamily may have a negative connotation for some, the participants in this study have lived in a stepfamily for over eight years, and share a positive perspective about their relationships and their family structure.

Anna noted the positive nature of her family:

*I think there's been a lot of good things and helping things that come out of this (remarriage), but again even the children, it's taken all of us to make it work. And I just don't ever want to take it for granted. You know, because it just takes one misunderstanding, I think, to see things unravel. But we have a good investment, we've invested a lot of positive, good things, good sentiments with each other. So we have a lot to draw on.*

Anna went on to express her determination to see the best in the various people involved, even when faults are present:

*(My ex-husband) Arnold is a great dad, and Alan is a great dad as well, and each of them have their own gifts and their own shortcomings just like I do. And so, I need to honor them wherever they're at in that.*

Betty stressed similar sentiments when she stated, "Even though I don't agree with a lot of things about my ex-husband and stuff, I still try to say well, you know, this is good, this is good."

Annette described her family as:

*a really nice family. I mean, I think its cool that both my mom and my dad get along 'cause most divorced parents aren't like that, and I feel lucky to have parents like that. And sometimes, you know, it gets kind of old shuttling yourself back and forth to each house, but I like my family for the most part – I wouldn't really change it.*

When asked how she feels when she sees her mom and Alan together, she responded *“Good. I mean they seem happy – if they were fighting then that wouldn't feel good, but they're pretty good right now.”*

Annette added, *“I did a PowerPoint not that long ago about how having divorced parents is cool.”* Her mother Anna described it too:

*I came home one afternoon, and she (Annette) had made this PowerPoint presentation of the benefits of having divorced parents! (laughs) She was like, ‘You get more presents, you get tired of one view or scenery you can go to the other house.’ She had all these things laid out. It just kind of knocked me out of the water. But it also reassured me that hey, you did something right!*

Although the holidays often mean shuttling between various cities in two states with different members of her extended family, Annette exclaimed, *“I like it! It's fun, it keeps things exciting. I get to celebrate those (holidays) for a very long time.”* She expressed similar sentiments about living in a shared residential custody situation:

*It definitely keeps life interesting, and I think it's fun cause you know if you get tired with some of the people here, you can go to the other house. When you are away from someone, it makes you miss them and appreciate them more. You definitely appreciate the people more when you're away from them.*

When asked to describe his feelings about his family, Brian responded,

*Pretty happy, 'cause I mean all in all, I have a pretty good family. I have a lot of friends, and we all have good families. Like all of my friends, I have a pretty strong family and stuff – pretty open. I don't know if proud would be the right word – like something close to proud.*

*Flexibility/Adaptability of the Mother*

Another factor which contributed to the success of these stepfamilies is the degree of flexibility and adaptability demonstrated by the mothers as they dealt with the stressors and adjustments of divorce, of being single mothers, and subsequent remarriage. As Anna so aptly phrased it,

*There are too many personalities, there are too many other factors that come into a blended family that you don't expect and you just kind of have to deal with it as they come and know that those will make you stronger.*

To cope with those challenges, the mothers were able to seek out and utilize support networks and resources, maintained sensitivity to the needs of their children by striving to make careful transitions, and helped their children maintain positive relationships with their biological fathers.

*Utilized Available Support Networks and Resources.* One of the keys to their successful transition for these mothers was their ability to seek and utilize support networks and resources post-divorce. As single mothers with toddlers, they turned to parents, siblings, and/or close friends for support. Moving back in with her parents enabled Betty to continue her university education. The flexible nature of the shared custody post-divorce between Anna and Arnold helped with raising Annette. In addition, Anna found her family to be a valuable resource. She remembers that she *"had a lot of familial support – even though they might not live here I could turn to them."* Anna also had a *"really good friend"* who spent time with her as well as caring for Annette while Anna worked. This friend is still considered by Annette to be a member of the family.

Other resources these mothers utilized during the time of marital transition included education, workshops, divorce support group, books, mental health professionals, child care centers, and church/spiritual faith. Anna recounted the value of these resources when her ex-husband wanted to change the custody arrangement.

*He asked me for a kind of split custody type situation. And split custody in his definition meant that he would have her one week and I would have her one week and he would have her one week and I would have her one week. Ugh! Just seemed really hard on a child, but instead of answering him, I said, 'Let me think it over.' So what I did is I called the professionals around town, psychologists and people from the child guidance center, and I got their input, and I called him back. And I said, 'Okay, here's what they say about this type of visitation and why it doesn't work. In addition to the book that I read that has the same information. And it just doesn't sound like a great idea after I researched it'. And he said, 'Okay fine. You've done your homework.' You know, I felt bad doing it, but over the years, I've learned that I don't know all the answers.*

**Timely Transitions.** When asked what words of advice she would give a woman with a child who is considering remarriage, Betty responded: *"First I would ease the kid into meeting the new father and make sure the new father likes kids, (and) does like your kid."* Even though Brian was only three years old when Betty met Bob, she exercised caution initially, allowing the relationship between them to progress slowly and naturally.

*Bob didn't meet Brian right away. There was quite a delay – I think we tried as much as possible to ease into things. He was used to having other men around that weren't necessarily romantically involved with me, so we kind of started off sort of slower. Being so young, I am sure he didn't even realize we were dating at the time or anything. Bob started to take over more of that kind of babysitting role, so it wasn't suddenly there's this person here. It was more of a slow, subtle, way into his life. Living together while Brian was still so young also helped with the process of adjustment. As it was, he grew up with this being the only family configuration he can remember, or imagine.*

**Relationship with Biological Father.** The mothers in this study maintained a great degree of flexibility in dealing with situations and challenges that arose with their child's biological father. These challenges often revolved around financial and visitation/custody issues. Betty

gave a glimpse of this in discussing her son's participation in their traditional Sunday morning brunch:

*Brian is there (at Sunday brunch) some of the time, but not always. He either has Boy Scouts or sometimes he's over at his father's. And things like Christmas, Thanksgiving –that always gets touchy. Who has who when, you know, and that's something that I can never – it doesn't really matter to me what day we celebrate Christmas – that's fine. If you (Brian's father) want to have him on Christmas morning that's fine.*

Anna has maintained a close friendship with her ex-husband through the years, yet there were many times when remaining flexible was essential, but not always easy. In order to minimize the impact of their separation on Annette, they chose to live near each other. Annette remembers,

*I got to see my dad every other week or whenever I would want to. They would actually drive me over there to the other person's house if I wanted to see them really badly, and I've always had full access to both parents.*

Anna described a recent situation in which the positive relationship with her daughter's father was especially meaningful.

*So I think it's just truly a God-given gift to have two men who can respond emotionally appropriately. I can remember distinctly – I had gone up and said my bed time prayers with Annette, when she was still little, and Arnold was here helping Alan with a computer problem. And after I was done saying prayers, I said, 'Okay dads, it's your turn.' And so they both went upstairs and both knelt down and both prayed with Annette and said her prayers for night-night. (Laughs) And I'm going, 'Okay, yeah!'*

### *Effective Conflict Management*

Although these stepfamilies shared many positive attributes, conflict was mentioned frequently. Each individual mentioned at least one recent or ongoing conflict, whether it was a child getting into trouble for misbehaving, spousal disagreement over work and finances, or

differences in perceptions of roles and responsibilities. However, a strength these families share is a desire to minimize conflicts and work through them when they do arise.

*Compromise.* While these families shared many positive attributes, they admit that working through issues of contention or disagreement that arose along the way was not always easy. However, they stressed that working toward a compromise was essential for a good relationship.

Alan defined compromise as

*trying to figure the right way to do things, not to be hateful to one another, but to get along. It's talking and getting along, going over issues that come up. Whereas my point of view and her point of view we'll come to a compromise of what's best.*

Compromise seemed to be important for both couples in regard to the differing parenting styles and values they brought into the marriage, and issues that arose as new situations demanded adaptive responses. For Betty especially, compromise was a challenging process.

*I think in the beginning I was like, 'I've been doing it my way for however long now, I'm gonna continue doing it my way.' Now I mean in order to have a relationship with someone I had to go, 'OK, you do have valid points. I have to listen to you.' And Bob has been good at saying you're being way overprotective, you need to ease up a little bit. It takes me awhile to go, 'OK, maybe I am.' That kind of helps you find the balance with it.*

Parenting was not the only issue confronting these couples demanding compromise and some form of resolution. Finances were a source of on-going challenge for one family, and while compromise was usually reached, it was not without some disagreement:

*So whether or not he (Bob) wanted to, he knew if he was going to be serious about us, and you know when we all moved in together, he was kind of supporting that role (stepfather) financially. That doesn't mean we*

*didn't have a lot of fights, arguments, discussions, about it (laughs), but we'd have to talk about it because there was only so much money to go around.*

Perhaps Bob best summarized the importance of compromise when he stated, *"She wants it this way, I want it that way – but we both work things out, or we wouldn't be together anymore."*

*Non-involvement of the children.* A common theme was the determination on the part of the parents to minimize conflict in front of the children, especially when it involved the children. Alluding to a very difficult previous marriage, twice Alan spoke about *"not using the kids as a pawn"* in trying to hurt the other parent. He said, *"It's one thing talking about parents having problems, but don't bring the kids into it."* He affirmed how Anna did not restrict Annette from her biological father. *"There was no, 'You can't see your dad' or 'You can't talk to your dad', you know, it's whenever she wanted, she (Anna) let her talk to him."*

However, Bob expressed the belief that there can be an appropriate place for children in parental disagreement: *"We tend to work things out together as much as possible including Brian in things that concern him because he's part of our family and he should know what we're doing."*

These stepfamilies defined themselves as successful, emphasizing caring, minimizing conflict, and the duration of the marriage as primary elements of their definitions of success. Before and after their marriages, they implemented positive behaviors and communication patterns that facilitated their success. While there were many strengths and reasons for success, there have been challenges and struggles throughout their lives together as stepfamilies. This is addressed in the next section, which identifies some of the challenges these families have faced, and in some situations, are still confronting.

#### Research Question 2:

What Challenges Did the Families Face in Forming a Successful Stepfamily?

The participants in this study have dealt with a variety of challenges in the process of forming a stepfamily. Challenges they identified included maternal gatekeeping, differences in parenting practices, lack of predetermined expectations, stepfamily realities, and a few specific issues that were unique to each family.

### *Maternal Gatekeeping*

The role of gatekeeper is described as one who attempts to control and manage information and interaction between those who are inside the gate and those who are outside. In the case of intact nuclear families, the mother has been found to serve as gatekeeper between her children and their biological father, impacting his involvement in parental involvement and discipline. Gatekeeping has not been studied in stepfamilies, but this study reveals that both mothers in these stepfamilies serve as gatekeepers to some degree between their children and their husbands, at various times and in different ways.

Following her divorce, Betty acknowledged that her son *"was basically my life. I have always been protective of him and probably the world centered more around him."* This was exemplified in the way she slowly allowed Bob access into Brian's life even after they were married, and the reluctance with which she relinquished sole parental responsibility.

*In the beginning I was a little possessive of that role and I think I wanted to be the parent to make all the decisions. 'I've been doing it my way, I'm gonna continue doing it my way'. It took me a long time, I think to say, 'Hey, what is your view of this?' It was kind of like, 'Well, this is what we are going to do, and now you do it.'*

Asked to describe his family, Bob stated, *"It definitely will go Betty first, and then me - Betty's the boss."* Betty's dominance was manifested in her retention of parental authority, allowing Bob to move only incrementally from outsider to parental authority, a transition that still seems to be in process after 11 years. Bob remembers,

*There were some conflicts there, of course, because if I'm gonna have to watch him and be there then I have to have some kind of authority over him! So we had some conflicts and we hashed it out, and basically when she knew we were going to be together, I was given more authority as a disciplinarian. The only thing I ever asked is I needed the ability to punish or reward if problems occurred. Because if not I'm just a punching bag. And it can't be like that.*

In Alan's relationship with his stepdaughter, the gatekeeping took a different form. Alan described Anna as being in control and the one from whom other family members take direction.

*Women kind of control how the atmosphere goes sometimes. I think a lot of it falls back on the mother as far as how the kids are. I know me and (ex-husband) Arnold take our cue from how Anna is at times and then we can influence how she is on things.*

In contrast to Betty, Anna was eager for Alan to assume disciplinary authority early in their relationship, despite his reluctance to assume that role. Anna described one such moment:

*I remember giving him those reigns. Annette spouted off something that was really inappropriate, and it was something offensive to (Alan), and he looked at me like, 'Can I respond?' (laughs) And I looked at him and I said, 'You have full rights, you are an adult. You can discipline her. She's the child here. Even though we are just dating, you know, you're still the adult so I trust you to discipline her.' And he was like, 'Okay, just checking. (laughs) Just wanted to make sure.' He struggled with (discipline) in terms of when is it time to do that, you know, so I'm jumping in going, 'Now's the time!' (Laughter) 'This would be the time!'*

Instead of using parental authority, Anna seemed to accomplish some measure of control and maternal gatekeeping through the use of communication. In sharing how she strives to keep the various relationships functioning smoothly, Anna stated, "I am real intentional with my language in trying to get Alan – (Alan can get very defensive pretty easily). And so, I've been real intentional with him as with Arnold as well." After sharing an anecdote in which she wanted to persuade the biological father to do something, she continued "Even with that little conversation, I knew I had to be intentional about how I phrased it."

### *Differences in Parenting Practices*

Differing approaches to parenting served as a source of disagreement between the mothers and the stepfathers in these families. Both stepfathers tended to be less strict than were the mothers, which sometimes created tension. Betty's body language seemed to express some disapproval when she noted,

*For a long time Bob wanted to be the buddy. I mean that's a much more comfortable role and I still think he prefers that role over having to do anything that's too serious in a disciplinary role, like to Brian. (As far as) Bob's view on my parenting skills, I mean there's plenty of things he's disagreed with me and to some I finally caved in.*

Alan reflected on his early role in Annette's life: *"I let her do things, like play more than Anna would. I kind of relaxed the atmosphere."* But then he admitted, *"(Anna) kind of disliked it."* He cited more than one instance in which he felt Anna needed to be less strict, recalling that at one point that he told Anna, *"You just gotta let her be a kid, you're being too strict on her."*

Although she was young at the time, Annette still remembers the transition that occurred when Alan became her stepfather:

*He wasn't really strict at all 'cause he didn't like to come in and change anything so he didn't really do anything. My mom was always the strict one and he was not the strict one. He actually did not like being the boss. My mom had to force him to try to become an authority figure to me, because then, you know, I would always think of him as a guy I can kind of push around.*

Not only did differences in temperament lead to tension and conflict, so also did differing beliefs and preferences in disciplining the children. Bob stated,

*By no means was it easy because of the differences we had in the style of parenting. (Betty) didn't want any physical punishment like spanking and things like that and I had to deal with things like that – that's not my*

*belief. The punishing aspect of Brian between spanking and not spanking and two different beliefs was probably our biggest argument throughout our entire marriage.*

### *Lack of Predetermined Expectations*

In both families, expectations, roles, and rules were not predetermined or set in advance, but were created as the need arose. For instance, neither family could recall any conversations that they had prior to marriage regarding parenting of the children, other than how the stepparent was to treat (or not treat) the children. Ground rules and responsibilities/chores seem to have been discussed as the need arose, with the mother typically initiating such conversations.

While this informal style of couple functioning seemed to be satisfactory to the adults, it served as a source of frustration to the children. When asked how rules are made in her family, Annette summarized the approach taken by both sets of parents:

*Usually it's like trial and error and that type of thing. Like you bounce the ball in the house and break something, then there's a rule – no bouncing the ball in the house. (Laughs) You tie the dog to the chair or something, and she drags the chair around the house and breaks it – 'Yeah, don't do that.' I don't know. Usually our rules don't come till after we've done broken a rule that wasn't there before and then it becomes a rule.*

When asked about rules in his family, Brian responded,

*The only rules I can think of are – I really don't know where the rules come from! I guess they talk about it and then they tell me it's gonna be a new rule, but I really don't know who makes them.*

He expressed similar uncertainty when asked about how he knew what chores or responsibilities he was expected to perform, *"It was just kind of, I don't know. Like, no one really tells me to do it. I just kind of know I'm supposed to do it."*

### *Stepfamily Realities*

Some of the challenges dealt with by these families were simply the result of being in stepfamilies. Challenges included the role of the stepfather in parenting and disciplining the child, the definition of the role of the stepfather with his stepchild, the inclusion of half-siblings, and the issues with the role and relationship of the biological father.

### *Role of the Stepfather*

Although Alan and Annette have a relatively close relationship, Alan repeatedly voiced frustration that things have changed in their relationship now that Annette is older. He expressed the belief that part of this change was due in part to Annette entering adolescence and the influence of television, but primarily he ascribed the changes to the fact that he is not her biological father. Alan explained,

*When you're not the biological parent, it's like restraints. You can't really do anything. It doesn't matter what you say, it's the kid, in their mind (is thinking), 'You're not my parent – you can't say anything to me.' She'll go to her mom or whatever, and at that point, that's when it was kind of frustrating. You can't do anything.*

Alan then described the contrast between disciplining his stepdaughter and his biological daughter, Alisha:

*There is a difference! I have no second thoughts about disciplining Alisha, where when I discipline Annette I got second thoughts. I've tried with Annette, but there is a barrier because it's like, 'You're not my dad,' and that hurts a ton. There is a difference between raising a child that's not yours and is yours. It's like you have restraints with one of them and with the other one you don't.*

There was no report of Brian telling Bob that he could not discipline him because he is not his biological father. However, each family member noted that Brian expresses his displeasure and distance from his stepfather by calling him "Bob" rather than the usual "Dad" when Bob disciplines him or he becomes upset with his stepfather for some reason. In clear contrast, Brian does not call his mother by her first name when he is upset with her.

The children also reported some frustration with the realities of having a stepfather. Betty described her observations of Brian's experiences in trying to relate the father/stepfather relationship to his friends, most of whom only know his stepfather. *"I think sometimes it's a frustration because he has to define two people. This is my stepdad, even though I call him "Dad," he's actually my stepdad. 'Oh yeah, that is my biological father there.' That's a frustration."*

Anna described the challenge of trying to successfully deal with the various personalities and relationships in her stepfamily:

*It's pretty challenging because I've left Alan out of the equation and really focused on Annette at times and I had to hit myself over the head and go, 'Oh yeah, it's two dads! I need to remember to incorporate (both of) them.' You have to remember that you're all players in each other's lives, even though as exes, when you shouldn't be as much, but with children, you have to be. I mean the focus (is) on the children and (that) maybe (requires) having a better understanding of your roles.*

### *Half-siblings*

While close relationships rapidly developed between the children and their stepparents, familial relationships faced new challenges and some emotional distancing when half-siblings came into the family. Alan noted, *"We have the child between the two of us, Alisha. Sometimes I feel bad about that because she's not (pause) - to me a normal household is mother and father all the way through. Not this in between stuff."* His wife Anna corroborated that sense of frustration.

*Before Alisha came into the picture I could walk into the room and they wouldn't notice because those two were so tight with each other, Alan and Annette. And so when Alisha showed up all bright-eyed and bushy tailed, she stole his heart, and Annette knew it. And that was really hard for her – it was hard for me to watch that. To me family in a big sense is unconditional love, and I don't think Alan has that for Annette. But that's not to say that he wouldn't do anything for her, or that he doesn't want to be involved in her life. But*

*Annette would tell you that he would safeguard his own daughter's emotions first and paramount before hers. She's very on it about her relationship with Alan. She knows where she stands, and it just kills me.*

Annette described the relational changes resulting from the birth of her new half-sister:

*(Mom) married Alan and then had Alisha, and so without Alisha there it was just me and mom, so we talked a lot more. I never really do spend time alone with Alan. I used to when Alisha wasn't here 'cause it was just me, him, and my mom. And then if my mom wasn't home, it'd just be me and him home. The only time we've ever got into a fight was about Alisha 'cause he's very protective of his daughter.*

Brian remembers being happy when his biological father remarried, but that his relationship with his stepmother changed when they had children:

*I was happy (when my dad remarried). I mean, I liked my stepmom a lot. At that time I was still an only child, and so it's kind of a lot different. Because I felt a lot different (about) going over – but I like my stepmom. I never really saw her as a mom, it's just cause I had such a strong relationship with my mom that I saw her as my dad's wife kind of. But I did like her a lot. Since I have stepsiblings I see them more like my dad and then their mom, but then they have the same dad as me. I just don't have a very strong relationship with my stepmom – she's kind of there.*

### *Dealing with Biological Fathers*

In one stepfamily, the biological father was considered by all family members as a friend and another member of the family. The relationship was marked by communication and close cooperation. In the other family, the opposite was true. There was little or no interaction between the biological father and his son until the mother remarried, and then visits were sporadic and the relationship difficult. Bob observed this about his stepson's biological father:

*I mean he has blown every opportunity in his life to be there for Brian. He's never basically done his part in taking care of Brian. In the early days he was not even trying to be there, he was actually trying to cause Betty more grief, than try to be with Brian.*

Betty described the challenge of trying to help maintain a positive relationship in the family despite what the biological father may do:

*Brian goes away for the weekend, and there have been weekends when all we did was complain about my ex-husband the whole time Brian was gone, but we try not to do it in front of Brian. And we have also tried, when my ex-husband has done something stupid, we talk to Brian about how he's a good kid. We don't bring my ex-husband into it but, when Brian realized my ex has done something kind of stupid, we kind of tell him, 'Well, you don't have to be that way,' even though we try not to put down my ex. It is a balancing act.*

Regardless of the type of relationship the biological father has with the child, both mothers reported feeling the need to not verbally respond, to bite their tongues at times. Betty noted that it takes *"a lot of listening and biting my tongue."* Later she added,

*Sometimes it's not just as much biting my tongue as going, 'Yeah, you're right, Brian.' Not having an opinion sometimes is effective. You just have to do that for the kid. Just listen. Even though you are going, 'Yeah, you're right.'*

### *Specific Challenges*

While the participating families shared many common challenges, additional challenges have been faced, and in some cases overcome, in the process of becoming successful stepfamilies. The ones that were dominant in the data were lack of time at home by the stepfather, emotional health issues, differing role expectations between mother and stepfather, and financial issues.

#### *Lack of Time at Home by Stepfather*

A challenge confronting the stepfamilies in this study noted by every participant is the lack of time the stepfathers are able to spend at home. Both men began and manage their own businesses, which necessitates their working long hours. In describing his challenge to find time

to spend with his children, Alan stated, *"It depends on me, what time I got to get to work, but I try to see them before I leave in the morning because I come in later or I'm not there till the next day."* Bob repeatedly expressed his regret that his time with the family is limited, saying,

*I have times where I'm sad where I miss out on so much. If there's anything if I could ever want to change it'd be the ability to spend more time with them. We don't have a lot (of family traditions) 'cause my life is consumed by this business.*

### *Mental/Emotional Health*

Although Anna described her divorce as highly amicable, even sharing the same lawyer with the man she was divorcing, Alan recalls that *"Anna was bitter with the divorce."* Asked to describe the situation existing after the divorce and before she began a new relationship, Anna revealed that *"I wasn't healthy emotionally"* and that in her parenting there was *"a lot of screaming and not listening."* Emphasizing that she *"wasn't mean all the time,"* Anna talked about parenting post-divorce, twice mentioning she got *"frustrated"* with Annette, felt like *"pulling my hair out"*, and that they had an *"on-going battle every morning."* She simply *"didn't have any answers. It was really hard."*

Post-divorce transitions were difficult for Annette, for whom there were a number of transitions before she reached kindergarten: changes in their living arrangements, people involved in their lives, and differing custody arrangements. During this time Annette regressed in terms of toilet-training and other aspects of her development. She also felt a *"loyalty pull"* between her mother and biological father, which would leave Annette crying in confusion until different custody transfer arrangements were made. Anna reflected on what all the changes meant to her daughter who was a toddler at the time:

*Here's this big change of divorce and then a year or two later, mom's moving and then, 'Okay, what kind of change is that going to bring into my life?' You know all of those unspoken things that kids worry about. And she had a terrible time transitioning."*

### *Differing Role Expectations of the Mother*

The role of the mother in the family has been an on-going source of challenge for Alan and Anna since before they married. One of the pre-marital expectations Anna had of Alan was that he would understand her plans for a career. *"I wanted him to hear ambition, the ambitions that I had, what it means to me, and I don't think he does."* Alan acknowledged the source of conflict as well, and explained his perspective:

*I'm used to growing up in a house where my mom stayed at home and my dad worked. And Anna, she can't stay at home. She – it drives her nuts. My expectations was she'd be home taking care of the kids and I'd be out working. It don't work that way. (laughs) She's told me so! I don't want to say it hasn't worked out, it's working. It's just, I feel that's where my upbringing comes back to play is I'd rather see the mom home watching kids.*

### *Financial Challenges*

Finances have been a challenge for Bob and Betty. When they first met, Bob was starting a business, Betty was going to college, and Brian's biological father was not making child support payments. Betty described:

*Basically I had zero money and he was just starting a business, so he had zero money. So I think in the beginning he probably knew he was going to be burdened a lot more just because I was still going to school and had a couple more years left before I would be able to help financially with a lot of things. He knew if he was going to be serious about us, and you know when we all moved in together he was kind of supporting that role financially. That doesn't mean we didn't have a lot of fights, arguments, and discussions about it! Discussion wise, I don't know if we ever sat down with the budget or whatever. But we'd have to talk about it because there was only so much money to go around.*

The families in this study have dealt with challenges that are reflective of those faced by many stepfamilies, as well as some that are unique to their own situations. Due to the nature of their differences and disagreements, some will likely never be fully resolved. However, these

stepfamilies are successful in large part because they have remained together and committed through the midst of the challenges.

### Research Question 3:

What is the relationship between the stepfather and child?

What was the role of the mother in facilitating this relationship?

The relationships between the stepfathers and stepchildren have evolved over the years. The young ages of the children at the time their mothers and stepfathers began their relationships reportedly enhanced the stepfather-stepchild bonding experiences. The mothers played a pertinent role in the development of the stepfather-stepchild relationship which is based upon respect, and serve an on-going role in the stepfather-stepchild communication and interaction. The primary characteristic of the relationship, mutual respect between stepfather and stepchild, is described.

### *Ages of the Children*

The positive relationships between stepfathers and their stepchildren in the families in this study began when the children were only toddlers. Each of the parents voiced the belief that it was easier for the stepfathers and stepchildren to initially build such positive relationships due to the young ages of the children. Betty's observation was typical: *"It was helpful that Brian was little compared to being a 14 year old boy. Because he was so young. I think that makes it easier."*

Alan expressed a similar belief about the age of his stepdaughter benefiting the formation of their relationship:

*I think going into a marriage when the children are smaller is easier. I can see that because when they are in their teens, they've known their mom and dad for so long and somebody else is coming in like an outsider, you know. You could be the good person or you could be the bad person, and I don't know how you can control that.*

### *Mutual Respect*

While the young age of the children was likely a contributing factor to the warm initial stepfather-stepchild relationships in these families, the modeling of respect appeared to play a dominant role in the on-going development of those relationships. The respect shown by the stepchildren to their stepfathers appeared to be reflective of the respect modeled by the mothers. This respect was exemplified by the mothers asking their children for their input into their remarrying, by allowing the children the freedom to define and develop their relationships with their new stepfathers over time, and by enabling the children to maintain relationships with their biological fathers.

It was apparent that the mothers made a concerted effort to model respect in their homes toward their partners and their children. Throughout their interviews the mothers spoke of the necessity of maintaining a respectful environment in the home, regardless of personal feelings or challenging events. Anna was particularly emphatic on the subject of the role of respect in their home:

*That's what I think I've done is really kind of set that tone and say we are not going to dog anybody for doing what they think they need to do. Arnold is a great dad. And Alan is a great dad as well, and each of them have their own gifts and their own shortcomings just like I do. And so I need to honor them wherever they're at in that. It takes all of us, so I don't want to shine the light on me without shining the light on them even though I'm intentional about language and can see the respect, it really does takes all of us to be the receivers of that as well with each other.*

Respect for the children appeared to be more commonly communicated through daily actions than verbalization, as demonstrated by the mothers seeking their young children's approval of whether or not they should remarry. As explained by Annette,

*I remember her asking me, 'What would you think if I married Alan or if he lived here all the time?' And I said, 'Yea, that's fine!' I was excited 'cause I liked him a lot. It made me feel a little more important, you know, like she valued me. I kind of felt more valued from her asking me.*

A second area in which respect was shown to the children was allowing them to define their relationships with their stepfathers, including which name(s) they would call them. As one stepfather stated,

*You know, give them the options of letting them decide whether to call you Dad, or Stepdad, your name, whatever. And you can't have expectations of them liking you because, you know, they are an individual person. You can't force yourself on the kid.*

Betty recalled the respect she and her husband gave Brian by allowing him to choose how he would address his stepfather. *"We never made him call Bob 'Dad', and to this day he calls him Dad about seventy-five percent of the time. When he's upset with him, he'll go back to Bob! (laughter) But you know, we never said, 'You have to call him that' or anything."*

A final aspect in which respect was evident between the stepfather and stepchild was in relation to parenting and discipline issues when the children needed to be reprimanded or disciplined. Both stepfathers attributed at least part of their ability to provide effective parenting to the mutual respect between stepfather and child. In speaking of her husband's role, Betty observed that, *"I think one of the things that helps the relationship is that Brian does want to have his (stepdad's) approval and I think that kind of gives Bob clout – the things that he says. If he didn't want his approval, it wouldn't matter very much."* Alan summarized his parental relationship with his stepdaughter by saying, *"I guess it comes back to (the idea that) you respect them and they respect you."*

### *Mothers' Roles*

In addition to modeling respect, the mothers played a pertinent role in facilitating the development of respect between stepfathers and stepchildren by preparing the children for the

changes in the home, coaching the stepfather in his new role, and allowing their children to develop relationships with their stepfathers without restricting them from interacting with their biological fathers.

The mothers took very different paths in preparing their children for the changes in the home. Betty intentionally restricted access between her son and Bob until she was sure they were going to be together. She said, *"Bob didn't meet Brian right away. There was quite a delay. I think we tried as much as possible to ease into things."* Gradually she allowed Bob increasing access, allowing him to pick Brian up from preschool, occasionally babysitting, and spending more time together as a unit. *"Bob started to take over more of that kind of babysitting role, so, I think that is kind of how it just eased its way in a little bit. So, it wasn't, you know, suddenly there's this person here. It was more of a slow, subtle, way into his life."*

Anna remembers being pro-active in helping prepare Annette for the coming of Alan into their lives:

*I just remember being real intentional with her about maintaining her role with her father. That didn't have to change, and he would always be there, and that I would always be there in terms of what she had in her dad – and that Alan was not here to replace Arnold, but he is a member of our family. And that he was going to be her stepdad.*

Anna explained to her daughter that marriage meant that Alan was going to be living with them on a full time basis. This was good news for Annette who recalled:

*I only remember having my stepdad in my family because when my parents got divorced I was two. So, I didn't really know anything else, but my mom and my stepdad really weren't married yet so, like he would come over and come back and I'd see him and he was really nice. So when my mom and dad, I mean my mom and my stepdad got married it wasn't like 'what a big shock'. I was kind of happy 'cause I really liked him.*

The mothers also helped establish the relationship between their children and their new husbands by coaching the stepfathers in their new roles, although it was more challenging for one than the other. Betty described it this way:

*There were probably things about how to discipline (Brian) or how to take care of him – things like that Bob and I discussed. I was a little possessive of that role and I think I wanted to be the parent to make all the decisions. It took me a long time, I think to say, 'Hey what is your view of this?' It was kind of like, 'Well this is what we are going to do, and now you do it.' I mean I knew I didn't want him to be abusive or put down Brian and I think it was probably very clear that you, you know there are certain things – you don't hurt Brian in any way.*

The mothers helped their children and spouses develop relationships based upon mutual respect, and continue to assist them in maintaining those relationships. The mothers are both very involved, but in different ways. Anna appears to mediate communication between Annette and Alan, which has become more difficult recently. After a recent disagreement between Alan and Annette over something she said to her little sister at the family dinner table, Anna attempted to reframe the issues and expressed her understanding for Annette's position at the table without taking sides or conveying disapproval of what Alan had said. Then after dinner, she spoke to Alan privately about the matter. She reflected, *"Alan heard that. I don't know that he fully understood, maybe he did I don't know, but I explained it to him later."*

Betty's role was clearly that of a communication facilitator. Since Bob works long hours and Betty is the one who spends the most time with Brian, she strives to make sure that Bob and Brian spend time together and that Bob is aware of what is happening in Brian's life. Betty noted that she tries to make sure that her son and her husband talk to each other about issues:

*(Brian) will tell me everything that happened during his day. And then in the evening I try to get Brian to basically repeat it all for Bob so Bob doesn't feel like Brian and I are this special little clique and that he doesn't even know anything that is going on."*

One of the ways the mothers enhanced the development of close, ultimately respectful relationships was by allowing and encouraging their husbands to develop their own relationships with the children. Anna remembers,

*I could walk into the room and they wouldn't notice because those two (Alan and Annette) were so tight with each other! He allowed Annette to be a kid when he was around, but I couldn't seem to get there, and so I was like, 'Oh thank God for Alan', because my child would have missed out on her childhood with just me around. He was like a ray of sunshine.*

Although she was young, Annette remembers the transition of her relationship with Alan from friend to stepfather:

*It changed a little bit 'cause he was more of an authority figure now. You know he wasn't really strict at all 'cause he didn't like to come in and change anything but he still was an authority figure, and I wasn't really used to that. My mom was always the strict one and he was (laughing) – not the strict one!*

#### *Current Stepfather –Stepchild Relationships*

With help from the mothers facilitating positive relationships between their husbands and children, the stepfathers reported feeling close and protective of their stepchildren. Both stepfathers recounted times they have served as advocates for their stepchildren to the children's mothers. Alan recalled many times speaking up for Annette: *"I tell Anna, 'Hey you know, just give her a minute!' And then I'd take Annette and explain to her what she (Anna) wanted done. I guess it's just (pause) being more on their (children's) level."*

By all accounts, the children in this study have had relatively close and stable relationships with their stepfathers from the beginning, although there have been challenges

along the way. In describing her perception of her son's relationship with his stepfather, Betty stated,

*Ninety percent of the time they get along great. You know ten percent they butt heads. Is it any more than like a regular dad with boys? I don't think so. I think that for a long time Bob wanted to be the buddy – he still prefers to be his buddy.*

However, her son Brian expressed some ambivalence when asked how he would describe his relationship with his stepfather:

*Hm. (pause) Well, (pause), I mean it's really good. I mean (long pause) um, you know, I really, I see him as like a father-figure. A lot. I definitely say my relationship with my mom is a lot stronger (pause) maybe it's 'cause my dad he's working a lot and stuff (pause) um, I think it was a lot better when I was younger (long pause) It's kind of, it's not as strong anymore. But, I still, I think it's probably because when I'm with my stepdad, I'm always with my mom and so, we don't spend that much of alone time together. But, it's like (pause) it's pretty good though.*

When asked to describe her relationship with her stepfather, Annette, like Brian, expressed some uncertainty:

*Um, it's good. We're, we're uh, you know, we're not like mean to each other or anything. We're good friends I guess. I mean we, he's like he's on this work thing right now, but, uh, yeah, um, (pause) yeah, we don't fight very much at all. The only time (hesitates) we're not like distant or close, or extremely close. I mean we're not like extremely distant. We're just (pause) kinda (pause) the only time we've ever got into a fight was about Alisha 'cause he's very protective of his daughter.*

#### *Summary of the Stepfather-Stepchild Relationship*

Results indicate that the stepfathers have maintained relatively close relationships with their stepchildren since they first met. The young ages of the children at the time of stepfamily formation was mentioned as being instrumental in making the transition relatively smooth. The mothers in this study played two major roles in the facilitation of the stepfather-stepchild

relationships, one of which was modeling and encouraging interpersonal respect. The other major maternal role identified by participants was the facilitation and mediation of communication between their husbands and their children.

Perhaps Alan best summarized this point when he observed, *"You can talk to the kids and tell them that you know, about getting along and all that. But to me, it still comes back to the parents, 'cause the kids follow what the parents are doing."*

#### Research Question 4:

How has/does the biological father influence(d) this process?

Although the biological fathers were not interviewed for this study, they had a large influence upon the formation of these stepfamilies. The biological fathers influenced the formation of the mother-stepfather dyads as well as the stepfathers' roles, increased the couples' need for adaptability in planning and communication patterns, and impacted their marital relationships. The mothers continue to play dominant roles in helping the biological fathers maintain positive relationships with their biological children.

The biological fathers' effect upon the early formation of the mother-stepfather relationship was that they served as negative role models for what the mothers did not want in a partner as they began to form new relationships. The mothers and their husbands all commented that this was a primary aspect of the mothers' premarital expectations – their new husbands would not be like the previous ones. Betty explained how she expressed her premarital expectations to Bob:

*I think probably the things I did not like in my ex-husband I did not want in my future husband. I think it was more me complaining about my ex-husband and, 'I hated this,' and 'Don't you ever do that!' I think that is probably how I made my expectations clear. Not that I expect you to do this, this, and this – it's just don't do*

*this. You know, this is what has happened before and I don't want this to happen again type thing. So whining and complaining about my ex is probably how I conveyed my expectations.*

While Anna also expressed concerns to her future husband about not repeating the past, she nonetheless had remained close friends with her ex-husband. Recognizing the potential for future problems and misunderstanding, she remembers being proactive about helping her future husband understand that friendship: *"I did coach him when we started dating on what Arnold's and my relationship was like so that he wouldn't go through any jealous path or feel like there was some other hidden agenda with Arnold."*

The biological fathers continue to factor into the development of the mother-stepfather marital relationships. In Family A, Arnold not only remained close friends with his ex-wife, but became a close friend of Alan's and is considered to be a member of the family. Annette is positive about her family configuration, in large part because of that close relationship. *"Alan and my dad became really good friends, which (is) cool with me. I mean, I think it's cool that both my mom and my dad get along 'cause most divorced parents aren't like that."* Alan reflected on the nature of his relationship with Arnold:

*That's one thing Anna tries to work on, that we get along. The three of us, the four of us or whatever, Annette, Arnold, Anna, and I, we all seem to get along. I could say (he's a) friend. Not a true friend, but he's a friend. Another family member I guess.*

In Family B, the biological father has been a source of continued tension for the mother and stepfather. Bob described the challenges:

*He's never basically done his part in taking care of Brian. In the early days he was not even trying to be there, he was actually trying to cause Betty more grief than try to be with Brian. And it wasn't until (recently) that he actually started being there. He's gradually starting to get better, but you know he'd never paid his child support. He was never there. He would make decisions of canceling appointments with Brian or just*

*not showing up! You see that in his eyes and the one time it really got me was they had plans to go and do something, go to an amusement park or something like that and he just didn't show up.*

Betty agreed that Brian's biological father served as a continuing source of conversation and tension:

*I mean (Bob) does not like my ex. You know I don't have any feelings anymore for my ex or anything, good or bad, he's kind of yeah, this guy I knew once. Where Bob is just going grrrrrr – still a little bit of a vicious dog towards him.*

Laughing, Betty added a further insight about their relationship with the biological father: *"When Brian does do anything stupid, (it's) never because we ever messed up, it's probably because Boris, my ex-husband messed up, so (he) makes a nice scapegoat."*

The biological fathers have not only shaped the mother-stepfather dyadic relationships, but also their conversational patterns. Betty noted,

*There have been weekends when all we did was complain about my ex-husband the whole time Brian was gone, but we try not to do it in front of Brian - we don't bad mouth my ex in front of Brian.*

She further added that she has done

*a lot of just listening and biting my tongue (so) that I don't go, 'Right, I can tell you eight hundred million other things wrong with him.' Um, because that's one thing I've always tried to do as much as possible is not to bad mouth my ex because eventually that would just turn around and bite me. That doesn't work very well.*

### Summary

The mothers in this study were found to be integrally involved in helping their families be successful. With the mothers serving as facilitators and role models, the families in this study exhibited a willingness and ability to use positive communication in building their relationships and working through the challenges of forming a stepfamily. Intentional, positive communication among and between family members helped them successfully deal with their

challenges which included parenting (and issues related to maternal gatekeeping), intra-familial conflict, and relationships with the children's biological fathers. These families defined themselves as successful, and have a positive sense of identity about who they are as families.

Stepfather's in this study had positive, respectful relationships with their stepchildren. This respect was modeled by the mothers and their children and husbands followed their example. Family members attributed part of the success of the stepfather/stepchild relationship to the ages of the children at the time of stepfamily formation. The couples' abilities to be flexible and adaptable, as well as intentional and positive in their communication, enables them to maintain effective co-parenting with the biological fathers and allows the children to have positive relationships with their fathers.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to discover and explore the perceptions, roles, interactions, and influence of biological mothers in helping their children and new partners form successful stepfamilies. This chapter will discuss the key findings, offer possible interpretations, and delineate some of the strengths and weaknesses of this study. It will conclude with implications for future research and for family practitioners working with stepfamilies.

The stepfamilies in this study encountered various challenges as they coalesced to form an enduring family unit. As they encountered challenges and systemic change, these families exhibited flexibility and adaptability in developing strategies to overcome those challenges. While different explanations were given by participants as to why their families are successful, the results of this study indicate that the mothers were significant contributors to that success. Their roles were critical in the formation of close relationships between their children and their husbands, promoting healthy on-going relationships between the biological fathers and the children, and helping to develop a positive perspective and sense of identity within the family.

### *Facilitating the Formation of the Stepfamily*

In both families in this study, the mothers and their children had not been living apart from the biological father longer than two years when the mothers began their relationships with the men who would become their husbands. Results indicate that the mothers not only took an active role in helping their children develop close relationships with their stepfathers, but they also have been integral to the on-going positive growth of that relationship.

### *The Mother's Role in Facilitating Child-Stepfather Relationship*

The mothers in this study played a pertinent role in facilitating the relationship between their spouses and their children. This was demonstrated by the frequency with which they

intervened in the stepfather-child dyad to either increase the frequency of the dyad's interactions or to resolve conflicts that arose. In particular, mothers facilitated effective communication and encouraged father-child interactions apart from the mother. The mothers also attempted to minimize disagreement by sometimes intervening to help resolve conflictual situations, and at other times by encouraging the stepfathers and the children to communicate face to face.

Respect was an essential element in the stepfather-child relationships. Respect as an aspect of stepfamily relationships has had limited study (Kelley, 1992), but the similar topic of relational warmth has been explored. Relational warmth between stepfathers and their stepchildren was found to increase stepfathers' level of role satisfaction (Fine, et al., 1997) as well as contribute to more positive relational development between stepfathers and their stepchildren (Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992).

One important way the mothers helped their husbands gain the respect of their children was by treating the children with respect in the process of family formation. They involved the children in their decision to marry and become a family. The mothers, and especially the stepfathers, attributed part of the positive nature of their family formation to the way the mothers empowered their children to make their own decisions regarding the nature and type of relationship they developed with their stepfathers. Even though the children were young, these couples allowed them to choose which names they would call their stepfathers, and exhibited flexibility in allowing the children to determine how they would relate to their stepfathers as well. This enhanced the children's sense of feeling respected, and they returned the respect.

Respect modeled by the mothers served to enhance the development of respect between the child and the stepfather. The mothers stressed their determination for respect to be shown in

the family, even in times of disagreement. This attitude helped facilitate the stepfathers' and children's transitions into their relationships.

The close, respectful relationship that grew between the children and their stepfathers served to create and strengthen a familial bond. According to Family Systems Theory, family systems are marked and defined by boundaries, which influence and generally serve to restrict to some extent movement into and out of the system (White & Klein, 2002). Because families attempt to resist change in an effort to maintain a sense of equilibrium, the entrance of the stepfathers into the mother-child subsystem necessitated an alteration and reorganization for the mother-child dyad. The mothers in this study aided this transition into a new family system by helping both their children and their husbands develop a respectful relationship over time.

Since stepfamily roles remain part of an "incomplete institution" with few established societal norms, the role of stepfather is still largely socially constructed upon the model of the father in the biological, intact family (Cherlin, 1978). Stepfathers typically enter into established mother-child systems with their own history and roles, and within that context stepfathers must navigate and forge new roles for themselves (Bergen, Carlson, Bzostek & Osborne, 2008).

The stepfathers in this study, in keeping with their own understandings and perceptions of their roles, sought and were given increasing amounts of parental authority by the mothers. Their high levels of expressed satisfaction in their stepfathering roles reflect findings by Fine and colleagues (1997) that indicated that stepfathers who exercise moderate amounts of parental authority have greater role satisfaction and more positive relationships with their stepchildren than do those who assert too much or too little parental authority.

The mothers' roles as mediators in the child-stepfather relationships were found to be critical in maintaining the stability of their family systems during the process of integrating the

stepfathers into their mother-child relationships. According to FST, for complex systems such as stepfamilies to endure is not enough; they must adapt themselves to modifications in their environment and they must evolve (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). This is a natural progression of healthy systems in general. The process, however, may fall anywhere on the spectrum between disorganized and chaotic on one hand and coordinated and orderly on the other. The formative processes of the families in this study were generally coordinated and orderly, due in large part to the mothers' influence and the priority they placed on ensuring the successful formation of their stepfamilies.

Positive behaviors and respectful attitudes modeled by the mothers helped shape the behaviors and attitudes of their children and husbands. From a theoretical perspective, this is consistent with the concept of "aligning actions" (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993, p. 151) within SI, in which an individual's behavior and role making are impacted and modeled by those around them. As Shopper (2001) asserted, "It is the mother who will define and redefine over time the stepfather's role for him and her children" (p. 11).

#### *Strengths Exhibited*

It is common for research with stepfamilies to be conducted from a "deficit perspective" (Bray, 1994; Brenner & Hyde, 2006; Coleman, et al., 2000). This study took an opposite approach, designed to discover factors which have helped stepfamilies be successful. As participants recounted and reflected upon their stories, several strengths were exhibited which had served to help them reach the point in their family life where they consider themselves successful.

Stepfamilies that have been together for at least four years have a strong likelihood of remaining intact (Bray, 1999; Hetherington, 1987). Having exceeded that milestone, these family

members' definitions of success were summarized by caring for each other, getting along, and the continuity of the relationship. These are noteworthy in their relative simplicity, yet they encapsulate their family strengths.

Some researchers (Furstenberg, 1987; Banker & Gaertner, 1998) have suggested that couples in second marriages may have reduced marital expectations and are "wary of wanting too much" and have "fewer illusions" (Furstenberg, 1987, p. 46) than they had in their first marriages. However, the couples in this study exhibited strong marriages, with all partners speaking highly of each other and with positive affect. Difficulties and challenges were consistently mentioned in the context of something they are able to work on as a couple, and they reported intentionally engaging in activities designed to strengthen their marital relationships. This is consistent with the results of previous research (Everett, 1998; Visher, Visher & Pasley, 2003) which found that a strong marital relationship is an important aspect of successful stepfamilies, and that "couples in successful second marriages experience greater marital satisfaction and pride than couples in successful first marriages" (McCarthy & Ginsberg, 2007, p. 119).

Overall the couples in this study maintained positive and respectful attitudes toward each other and other family members, even as they faced challenges in the process of forming their families. There was no indication in the data that the participants are all naturally optimistic, but they did exhibit a mindset or determination to be positive which was exemplified, and in some ways enforced, by the mothers.

An important theorem within SI states that "if people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993, p. 140). The data indicate that these mothers and their families chose to strive for a consistently positive perspective of their situation

and each other, in the midst of a society in which the very term stepfamily can have negative connotations (Hennon, Hildenbrand & Schedle, 2008). There are few greater tributes that could be paid to the positive nature and success of a stepfamily than for one adolescent child to develop a PowerPoint presentation portraying the benefits of having a stepfamily, or another adolescent describing his feelings toward his stepfamily as “*something close to proud.*”

Mothers in stepfamilies are generally more optimistic than other family members in their perceptions of family issues (Kurdek & Fine, 1991), while Golish (2003) reported that stepchildren, and to a lesser degree their stepfathers, tend to be more pessimistic about their stepfamily relationships. The mothers in this study are indeed positive in their shared perspectives, but it is not at all clear that they are more positive than other family members. In contrast, this study found that the children and their stepfathers in this study were positive about their family relationships and were quite willing to define their families as successful.

The couples in this study exhibited positive marital relationships and expressed satisfaction with their marriages. Following the mothers’ role modeling, these families had a positive perspective of themselves as stepfamilies. Participants’ positive perspectives on their relationships are closely related to one of the dominant findings of this study, which was their sense of positive identity as a family.

### *Positive Identity*

One of the strengths enhancing the formation and durability of these families is the perspective they adopted from the beginning of their parental relationships that they are a family. This reflects Coleman and Ganong’s (1997) assertion that “how the stepfamily is viewed by stepfamily members is critical to the negotiation of stepfamily life and is ultimately critical to the success or failure of the remarried family (p. 108).” Their identity, expectations, and

commitment are expressed in the context of their family unit, which they perceive and describe as a family rather than some lesser form or deviation from a normal family.

Participants described sensing they were a family from very early in the stepfather/mother relationship. The children particularly expressed positive feelings and beliefs about their stepfamilies, and did not consider themselves to be a “stepfamily”, but just a family. As Brian observed when asked about what it was like for him to see his mother and stepfather together: *“It’s just kind of like, someone would see their mom and dad together. It’s just normal. I mean to me it’s not really a stepfamily it’s just my normal family.”*

Had this study utilized the common deficit perspective (Bray, 1994; Brenner & Hyde, 2006; Coleman et al., 2000) in which stepfamilies are perceived to be problematic and deviations from “normal” (i.e. intact, biological) families, this strength of seeing themselves as true families would likely have been missed. This was especially evident in the children’s expressions of positive affect in regard to stepfamily life, acknowledging benefits and expressing pride in their families.

According to SIT, one’s performance of societal and familial roles, and the degree of satisfaction one achieves in the performance of those roles, results from communication with others (White & Klein, 2002). A dominant aspect of the relationships found in the families in this study was each individual’s willingness and ability to communicate with each other. Results indicated that these families valued communication with each other as well as with the biological father. Mothers in this study expressed determination to model positive communication and facilitate communication between their husbands and children. This strengthened the emotional connections between the family members, further enhancing their abilities to deal with the challenges they faced.

Their individual and collective willingness to communicate has enabled these families to negotiate spousal and parental roles, discipline issues, and provide the opportunity for the children to maintain active relationships with their biological fathers. While the stepfathers described various stresses and issues which have generated conflict through the years, they consistently mentioned being able to talk about them with their wives and thus were able to reach some measure of compromise or resolution.

### *Flexibility/Adaptability*

One of the more subtle contributions to successful family formation for the families in this study was the caution and selectivity exhibited by the mothers in choosing a spouse to ensure that they did not reproduce the negative characteristics of their first marriages. Thus difficulties in their previous marriages served to strengthen the current marital relationships. Once they began to sense that they had identified their future husbands, the mothers allowed their children to slowly develop relationships with them in order to ease the transition for the children and to be sure that the stepfathers got along with the children.

In addition, consistent with findings by Michaels (2006), the children in this study have been able to maintain active, positive relationships with their biological fathers at least partially as a result of their mothers' abilities to be flexible. The mothers willingly accommodated the expressed needs of the biological fathers by adjusting their own schedules and preferences to enable the children to spend time with their biological fathers. This facilitated the children's ability to maintain positive relationships with their fathers post-divorce, which Bauserman (2000) found helps children have higher self-esteem, better emotional adjustment and overall more positive family relationships. This reflects findings of other studies that indicated that the quality of mothers' relationships with their children can help prevent deterioration of their

children's relationship with their biological fathers post-divorce (Amato & Booth, 1997; Scott, Booth, King, Valarie & Johnson, 2007).

The strengths identified in these families regarding communication, positive perspective, and a positive identity served to make them more resilient in dealing with the challenges they faced in family formation. The challenges identified in these families were consistent with those found in the literature. How these stepfamilies dealt with them reflected their strengths and led to greater understanding of their overall success.

### *Overcoming Challenges*

Challenges with unclear stepfather expectations, maternal gatekeeping, and stepfamily realities including dealing with the biological father were all mentioned by the participants. Although these families were confronted by on-going challenges, they consistently emphasized the ways they have addressed those challenges in the process of overcoming them.

### *Expectations of the Stepfather*

Consistent with the general lack of clear role expectations of stepfathers (Bray, 1994; Stewart, 2007; Svare et al., 2004), the mothers in this study could not recall having made any pre-marital attempts to provide clarity of their stepfathering role expectations. From the perspective of Symbolic Interaction, a lack of clarity about role expectations should lower the quality of role enactment as well as role satisfaction (White & Klein, 2002). However, this was not the experience of the families studied. The stepfathers generally expressed positive emotions about their relationships with their stepchildren and overall satisfaction with their roles as stepfathers.

This finding creates a conundrum: On the one hand, there is the expected outcome of unclear expectations based on theory and findings in the literature, which would indicate a

likelihood of reduced role and marital satisfaction. On the other hand are the satisfaction and happiness expressed by these stepfathers and their families.

Three elements contributed to the creation of this apparent conundrum. One explanation discussed above was the willingness and ability of the couples in this study to communicate. Role expectations were not spelled out in advance; they evolved over time. This was made less challenging than it might have been due to the young ages of the children when the stepfathers began making and taking their roles. The stepfathers had time to learn their roles as the children grew, and communication with the mothers allowed them to assume increasing parental responsibility. The third likely aspect of the explanation lies in the temperaments and personalities of the stepfathers, who are admittedly easy going and laid back in dealing with potentially stressful situations. As Alan so succinctly stated, *"I think men in general are easy-going."*

The parents in this study attributed the relative ease with which their children adjusted to their stepfathers to the young and impressionable ages of the children at the point of the new family formation. This is consistent with the findings of a qualitative study by Svare and colleagues (2004), in which a negative correlation was found between children's ages at the time of maternal remarriage and the children's positive adjustment to their stepfathers - the younger the child, the more likely they were to respond favorably to the presence and paternal role assumed by the new stepfather. Research has found that stepfathers are most likely to successfully create a role similar to that of a biological father when children are preschool age or younger at the time of marital transition (Whiteside, 1989; Gamache, 1997).

Another factor contributing to the stepfathers' positive adjustment was the ability and willingness of the couples in this study to communicate about issues and challenges as they arose. According to Symbolic Interaction theory, an important aspect of role taking is that there

are expectations on the part of the individual and others about that role. White and Klein (2002) stated “without clear expectations shared by both the actor and others, it is impossible for the actor to perform the role or for others to know how their behavior articulates with that of the actor” (p. 97). With some stepfathers having had no prior paternal experience upon which to build or learn their role, they likely learned their roles over time through interactions with the mother and her children. As Shopper (2001) so adeptly described this process, “It is the mother who will define and redefine over time the stepfather’s role for him and her children” (p. 10).

### *Maternal Gatekeeping*

Along with the lack of clear role expectations of the stepfathers, gatekeeping behaviors exhibited by the mothers further challenged the smooth formation of the stepfamilies. While a certain measure of maternal watchfulness and concern for their children would be expected, especially in the early stages of stepfamily formation, maternal gatekeeping continues within these families almost a decade after family formation. Mothers’ gatekeeping has resulted in their husbands viewing their roles as subordinate to that of their wives in parental discipline and decision making, and is a source of on-going marital conflict. These results are congruent with the findings of studies of maternal gatekeeping in intact, nuclear families (e.g. Allen & Hawkins, 1999; DeLuccie, 1995).

While from a systems perspective mothers’ resistance to change is understandable and even predictable, it nonetheless engendered conflict within these marriages. To negotiate change or advocate for their positions, the stepfathers sometimes utilized verbal coercion with their wives. Bob reported that he disagreed with how Betty parented her son: *“When I first met them she would baby him, severely, and I had to make her stop.”* Alan encountered the opposite situation, and felt compelled to intervene on Annette’s behalf at the beginning of his relationship with Anna:

*Anna was bitter with the divorce, (and so) it was easy taking it out on Annette as far as, do this and do that. She's just a kid (teared up- very long pause). I let her (Annette) do things like play more than Anna would. I kind of relaxed the atmosphere (smiled). (Anna) kind of disliked it. I said, 'You just gotta let her be a kid, you're being too strict on her!' I think she didn't realize how she was coming across to Annette.*

One stepfather even partnered with the child's biological father to discuss and precipitate desired changes on the part of the mother. Alan related:

*I know me and Arnold take our cue from how Anna is at times and then we can influence how she is on things. Anna gets to the point where, I don't wanna say strict, but she talks to the girls at a level higher than what they're understanding or treating them like a business person, and that's where me and Arnold can come in (to Anna) and say, 'Hey now wait a minute! Look at this! I'm not understanding what you're saying really or you know I'm getting a little confused on that part.' (Laughing) Then sometimes we'll gang up on her!"*

In the families in this study, the mother-child family systems were pressured into creating space to accommodate the paternal needs and role expectations of the stepfather. The systems received negative feedback that facilitated the changes that allowed them to advance to a new level of existence (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993).

One potential explanation for the mothers' reluctance to relinquish their parental/ familial authority to their husbands is that the husbands work extended hours away from the home. This necessitated the mothers retaining their roles as primary caregivers and disciplinarians. While this arrangement required minimal change in parenting authority throughout the course of family formation, it reduced the fathers' sense of belonging and involvement, a source of consternation to both stepfathers.

*Frustration with Stepfamily Realities*

The families in this study faced challenges typical of many stepfamilies, including the continually emerging roles of the stepfathers and their relationships with their stepchildren, the presence of half-siblings, and the children's on-going relationships with their biological fathers. To minimize some of those challenges, these families proactively encouraged and empowered their children to define and develop their own relationships with their stepfathers. By respecting the children and allowing them some measure of autonomy in this process, the parents enabled the children to develop relationships with their stepfathers at their own pace and in their own way.

The challenges that confronted these stepfamilies were not easily dealt with nor in some cases been completely resolved. The mothers were integrally involved in the challenges as well as playing vital roles in helping their families overcome those challenges and achieve some measure of success – clarifying the role of the stepfather in their own time and in their own ways, retaining primary parental authority throughout the marriage yet working with the stepfather to meet his parental needs, and helping their families work out differences related to custody arrangements and the involvement of the biological father. These families have also dealt with issues arising from the considerable influence of the children's biological fathers.

#### *Influence of the Biological Father*

As is typical of many stepfamilies, the families in this study have had to adapt and adjust to on-going influence of the children's biological fathers (Lamb, 1999). Both couples expressed a willingness to try to accommodate the biological fathers' needs to be involved in the lives of their children, thus allowing the children to develop and maintain positive relationships with their fathers. Marsiglio and Hinojosa (2007) found that stepfamilies function best when the stepfamily unit can negotiate some degree of cooperation with biological fathers. Their results

indicated that relationships between stepfathers and biological fathers are tenuous, if one exists at all, which means that mothers occupy a pivotal role in the facilitation of that cooperation.

In this study, both mothers role modeled positive communication by being willing to *"bite their tongues"* rather than speak negatively about their children's fathers in front of the children, and acted appropriately to ensure that their example was followed by their husbands. Once again the themes of respect, positive communication, and flexibility modeled by the mothers enabled these families to adapt appropriately to the needs and desires of the children's biological fathers.

Co-parental divorce is one of the last stages couples go through in the process of divorcing, and is typically an on-going process and series of adjustments as parents work out co-parental rights, roles, and responsibilities (Bohannon, 1971). The mothers in this study reported challenges throughout the process of stepfamily formation as they negotiated and maintained a working relationship with their children's biological fathers. These mothers demonstrated a high degree of flexibility in adapting and adjusting to the desires and demands of their children's biological fathers. The mothers consistently placed their children's needs ahead of their own, as demonstrated by their willingness to accommodate the changes the fathers made in visitation schedules, financial support, and unexpected and impromptu changes in plans for celebrating holidays.

Mothers further helped their children maintain positive relationships with their biological fathers by not restricting access to them, by avoiding derogatory comments about their fathers in the presence of the children, by reinforcing a positive image of their fathers and managing communication between the biological fathers and their children. Consistent with their emphasis on respect and positive relationships, the mothers encouraged their children to maintain close relationships with their fathers.

The biological fathers in this study exemplified two very different relationships with their ex-wives and the stepfathers, yet they serve a similar function - enhancing the relationship in both couples. One biological father's behaviors appeared to provide not only a common, external focus for the couple but a negative contrast to the involved and caring stepfather. This made both the mother and stepfather feel more positive about the stepfather's role in the child's life. The other biological father has consistently and intentionally served as a common friend and family resource, and is described by the stepfather as a friend and member of the family.

Despite the challenges, the efforts made by these families to maintain a functional working relationship with the biological fathers have resulted in positive benefits for the children. Both children reported being close to their biological fathers, and enjoy spending time with them. Rather than detract from the stepfathers' roles and interactions with their children, the mothers' facilitation of their children's continued relationships with their biological fathers has enhanced the children's emotional connections with their stepfathers (Kelly, 2007). Marsiglio and Cohan (2000) noted that a positive working relationship among the child's parents reduces stress for the child and allows children to expand their "social capital".

Looking at these families from a FST perspective, it was clear that they are extensions of an existing family system in which the original family is not fully dissolved. This is particularly true for stepfamilies where the biological fathers maintain their involvement and roles as fathers to their children. While the original family system has changed legally, the presence of the biological father in the child's life perpetuates the original family system. Hence, despite the propensity to simply describe families as having transitioned from intact families to stepfamilies, this process is complicated by the indispensable, emotionally still intact family. It may be more accurate to conceptualize a stepfamily as an expansion or addition to a partially intact family

system. Divorced families may also be characterized as bi-nuclear, with the mother-child and father-child systems (formerly subsystems of the intact family) still functioning, and the child serving as the common nucleus.

Legally, the original nuclear family no longer exists post-divorce, and if there are children, the parents typically have some degree of responsibility for co-parenting the children. If one or both parties remarry, the tendency for most in society is to view the new stepfamily as a nuclear family. However, neither of those perspectives can explain the reality confronting persons who are divorced and remarried. One of the great strengths of Family Systems Theory is that it provides a framework for more clearly understanding the function and dynamics of stepfamilies in relation to the children's non-residential biological parents.

In intact, nuclear families, husbands and wives can focus almost exclusively on their relationships with each other, and any children born to that relationship. Family Systems Theory addresses the complexities confronting stepfamilies in which the children's non-residential parents are a constant factor in the couples' relationships, requiring married couples to not only adapt and adjust to each other, but also to the non-residential parent.

Symbolic Interaction Theory provides additional clarity to understanding the dynamics involved with stepfamilies' relationships with the children's non-residential biological parents. As seen in this study, the meaning of the term "family" is subjective and reflects the meaning given to it by individuals. One stepfather exhibited an inclusive understanding of family by including the family pets as well as his stepdaughter's biological father, and other participants included a variety of friends and extended family members, supporting the idea that the meaning of the concept of family often is understood more as a generality than as a specific definition.

The role of father and its meaning for the person involved is also impacted by divorce. Behaviors that biological fathers have learned from their upbringing within society may assume that those roles and behaviors were part of their paternal rights. However, their roles and behaviors may be changed, limited or rendered virtually impossible post-divorce due to one party moving away, court restrictions, or co-parental agreements. As a result, their understanding of the meaning of the fathering role will undergo some degree of adaptation and adjustment. If mothers remarry, their new husbands must also begin the process described earlier in taking and making their roles as stepfathers.

### *Summary of Findings*

This study of stepfamilies found that mothers have vital and pivotal roles in assisting their family members to successfully adjust to their new relationships and roles. Noteworthy findings included the mothers' modeling of respect which resulted in the development of respect within the stepfather-child relationship, the mothers' facilitation of communication among family members, and their willingness and ability to adapt when challenges arose. These families are characterized by a strong sense of identification as a family and a generally positive perspective on their relationships.

### *Strengths and Limitations of the Study*

A strength of this study is its focus on stepfamilies with sufficient marital duration to be classified as successful. Research related to stepfamilies and stepfamily formation is too frequently reported either with no mention of duration of marriage (e.g. Koerner, Rankin, Kenyon, & Korn, 2004), or while families are still in the first year or two of marriage, when transitions and adjustments are still being made (e.g. Anderson, Greene, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1999; Fine, et al., 1997). Both couples in this study have been together for over

eight years, which gives them a broad perspective on the successes and challenges in making a stepfamily work. The children have lived within a stepfamily structure long enough to have adjusted to the shared residential custody their parents have arranged. Due to their developmental ages at the time of this study, they were able to give self-reflexive insights into their own feelings and their on-going processes of adjustment.

The unintended consequence of restricting the study to those who had been married at least five years is that it resulted in children participants who were so young at the time of the initial transition that they have little or no memory of life before their stepfathers came into their lives. They do not remember their initial feelings or their adjustments during the early transition period. Developmentally, younger children are likely to be more receptive to a new person in their lives than are older children, who are developmentally able to fully comprehend concepts such as mom and dad and family, and their own relationship within that context. As a result, this study informs families with small children at the time of formation, and is not reflective of the experiences of stepfamilies formed when the children were older.

An additional strength of this study is the similarity of life experiences in the families studied. A challenge in doing stepfamily research is that there are many different factors that affect adjustment within families, and each study can examine only a relative few. In this study, with the exception of the sexes of the children, there were a large number of commonalities shared by these stepfamilies, which reduced some of the factors that usually need to be considered. Adult participants in this study were Midwestern, middle-class, early middle age, and predominantly white (one parent is white Hispanic). The mothers have at least a college education and both are employed full-time outside the home. Both stepfathers are hard-working entrepreneurs who operate their own businesses, and are temperamentally similar in that they

tend to be relaxed and easy going. Because of the large degree of homogeneity and common life experiences shared by the families in this study, there were fewer intervening variables or factors to consider during analysis, thus strengthening the likelihood that the findings were reflective of successful families within these circumstances.

A resulting limitation of this study was the methodological decision to study only simple stepfamilies, in which the stepfathers had no biological children from previous relationships. Results indicated agreement with research by Halpert-Meehin & Tach (2008) that the addition of half-siblings in these stepfamilies generated challenges for the family members, and the inclusion of complex stepfamilies would have generated additional insights, since many stepfamilies in the United States are complex stepfamilies (Amato, 2001).

#### *Contributions of the Study*

The predominant contribution of this study to the literature is its unique focus on the role of biological mothers in stepfamilies in general, and specifically successful stepfamilies. While studies regarding the stepfather and children in stepfamilies have been numerous, research regarding the role and contribution of mothers in stepfamilies is negligible. This study confirmed that mothers play a much larger and more critical role in successful stepfamily formation than might have been presumed from their near absence in the research literature. Findings in this study provided initial validation of Rosin's (1987) observation that "the attitude of the mother and her ability to communicate regarding his (stepfather's) role" (p. 71) would be critical for stepfamily formation.

A further contribution of this study is its use of qualitative data collection and analysis techniques. Quantitative methods have dominated the study of stepfamilies. Qualitative research methods have had limited utilization in this area, and few, if any, have included multiple family

members – especially children. This study builds on the existing knowledge of stepfamilies (based primarily on quantitative studies) and contributes additional insight into the perceptions and life experiences of stepfamilies by allowing the participants to tell their stories without limiting them to particular responses or predetermined answers. The stepfamily participants in the current study provided rich descriptions of stepfamily formation based on their first-hand knowledge and experiences. These voices have given a view of stepfamilies that brings a fresh insider perspective to the literature base.

A further contribution of this study to the literature base is the usage of qualitative methodology. The inclusion of the children as well as the mothers and stepfathers in the interviews and analysis gave all family members a voice and provided valuable additional insights. Qualitative research has had limited utilization in the study stepfamilies, and few if any have included the children as well as adult family members. While each research methodology has its strengths and can contribute to our understanding of the dynamics of stepfamily formation and relationships, qualitative research needs to have broader use in the field in order to gain the greatest possible insight into the perceptions and life experiences of the participants. Our understanding can be enriched and new insights generated by intentionally giving voice and placing value upon the input from all members of the family.

Another addition this study makes to stepfamily research literature is its perspective and focus upon familial strengths and successes. Comparisons and contrasts with intact and single parent families were not drawn, neither in the interviews nor in the process of data analysis. The families in this study were approached from the perspective that they are legitimate families in their own right, which is how they identify themselves. While participants reported having dealt with various challenges, they consistently returned to the attitude expressed by one mother that

the challenges had served to make them stronger. This approach reflects the strengths-based approach to families emphasized and advocated by Arcus and colleagues (1993).

This is important because it places stepfamilies in a position in which the playing field has been leveled. The families in this study were selected and involved because they are stepfamilies, but they were treated as legitimate families and there was no comparison at any point with other family forms. By getting to know the families and catching a glimpse of their perspective revealed strong families with real strengths – strengths that have not only enabled them to be successful but which can provide positive patterns or models for others. Had the study been built upon a deficit perspective, problems and challenges would have been shared, but the rich resourcefulness and vibrant relationships found in these families would have been missed.

In this study each member of the family, including the children, was given a voice. Children were interviewed prior to their parents as an expression of the value of their perspective. The inclusion of all family members increased the number of perspectives, providing insights that in some cases would not have been gained if only part of the family had been interviewed (Patton, 2002). For example, had the children not been interviewed the findings regarding the importance of respect in the stepfather-stepchild relationship, as well as the positive sense of family identity, would have been much weaker and likely missed. However, allowing each family member to contribute resulted in stronger findings and provided truly multidimensional insight into the roles and relationships within these families.

This study begins to fill a gap in the literature regarding maternal gatekeeping in stepfamilies. A review of the literature indicated that maternal gatekeeping has been studied only in the context of intact, biological families (e.g. Allen & Hawkins 1999; DeLuccie, 1995; McBride et al. 2005). This study indicates that maternal gatekeeping behaviors generate tensions

and struggles for stepfathers regarding their parenting roles and practices. Even after eight years of marriage, the stepfathers in this study reported they have on-going uncertainties about their positions and involvement in the discipline of their stepchildren, and most of the conflicts mentioned in the interviews from all participants centered on this issue. Even though the stepfathers enjoy close relationships with their stepchildren, the mothers clearly facilitate those relationships. The mothers are involved in instructing the stepfathers to do activities with their stepchildren or talk about something together. It is common for the mothers to talk to the stepfathers about what they could have done differently regarding some disciplinary measure taken with the child, resulting in frustration and a sense of being restricted on the part of the stepfathers. Although it is unintentional, the maternal gatekeeping perpetuates a sense of constant awareness within the stepfathers that their stepchildren are really not their own children.

Positively, maternal gatekeeping was found to facilitate timely transitions in the adjustment process between the children and their stepfathers. By allowing their children to gradually get to know their future stepfathers, the children were able to transition into a relationship with them in their own time and to define the relationship in their own way. Thus the mothers enabled their children to create new roles for their stepfathers in their lives, without causing them to feel hurried or pressured to somehow make a loyalty decision between their biological fathers and their new stepfathers. The mothers' concomitant roles as gatekeeper and facilitator ultimately served to strengthen the relationships between their children and the stepfathers.

The mothers described in various ways their tendencies to be overprotective or needing to be informed and in on conversations between their husbands and their children. However, they also acknowledged that over time they became increasingly cognizant of the need to allow the

stepfather to have a greater role and sense of responsibility, a balance that all parents in the study admitted is still in process. There were times when life situations served as catalysts for mothers to transfer some measure of authority to their husbands, or at least made the mothers more aware of the advisability of doing so.

Therefore, this study moved our understanding of maternal gatekeeping forward in at least three important ways. First, the presence of such gatekeeping behaviors on the part of the mothers was clearly present – powerfully and consistently expressed by the participants. The second addition to the field was the positive contribution that mothers’ gatekeeping made to the initial building of the relationship between the children and their stepfathers. The mothers’ care and caution allowed the relationship to proceed at a pace appropriate for their children who were still dealing with post-divorce transitions with their biological fathers.

Finally, the negative aspects of maternal gatekeeping exhibited in the families in this study reflected some of the potentially negative results of such behaviors in intact, nuclear families (Cowdery and Knudson-Martin’s, 2005) including tension between the parents, and a gradual distancing of the father from involvement with his child. The subtle but important insight gained was that the difference between gatekeeping in intact biological families and the stepfamilies in this study was that such gatekeeping behaviors on the part of the mothers served to reinforce to the stepfathers that the children were not completely or really theirs. For one stepfather, the issue was partly resolved when his own child was born into the marriage, allowing him to feel greater freedom and comfort parenting and interacting with her than with his stepdaughter.

The role of respect within the stepfamily was an unexpected discovery in this study and provides another unique contribution to the literature. Warmth (Fine et al. 1997), harmony

(Banker & Gaertner, 1998), and nurturance (Schwartz & Finley, 2006) have been identified as positive factors in stepfather-child relationships. The meaning and development of respect, and especially the mother's role in this process provides an additional dimension that can expand our understanding of stepfamily formation.

Respect modeled by the mothers was not only a critical aspect of the relationships between the stepfathers and their stepchildren, but also extended to the way the mothers and stepfathers treated each other and the biological fathers. Respect was an integral part of the mothers' expressed determination to speak intentionally and positively to all members of the family, and again was emulated by others. The term respect is similar to the term family, in that it is easier to describe than to define. Gottman (1995) found respect to be an essential component in relationships, the absence of which can signal contempt and lead to a deterioration of the relationship.

#### *Implications for Researchers*

The maternal gatekeeping identified in the stepfamilies in this study appeared to mirror the maternal gatekeeping found in nuclear, biologically intact families. Studies (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagan & Barnett, 2002; McBride, 1990) support the idea that some mothers believe they need to protect their children from their own biological fathers. However, this limits the fathers' involvement in raising their children. While strong maternal gatekeeping may be challenging for fathers in nuclear, biologically intact families, (Allen & Hawkins, 1999) it might be appropriate in stepfamilies – especially in the early stages of family formation. The level of gatekeeping necessary or appropriate for mothers in stepfamilies in which their husbands are not the children's biological fathers needs to be explored.

With findings gleaned from this study, various follow-up studies could be designed to further explore maternal gatekeeping in stepfamilies. One possibility would be to replicate this study in terms of participants and requirements, but modifying the variable of the children's ages when they came into a stepfamily. Children who were between the ages of 7 and 10 when the mothers remarried would have greater memories of the entrance of the stepfather into the family. Questions regarding the mothers' involvement in the stepfather's transition into the family, her perceptions of him as a parent, and how she began to allow or encourage him to assume parental roles and responsibilities would lead to greater insight into the challenges facing stepfamilies in which the children are older. The strength of working with simple stepfamilies is that there are fewer complicating variables with which to contend.

This study was undertaken as a preliminary, investigative prelude to further study into the roles of mothers as well as the characteristics of successful stepfamilies. A possible next step is the development of an internet-based study, to which mothers, children, and stepfathers from across a broad spectrum of the population can respond. Regarding maternal gatekeeping, how do mothers in stepfamilies perceive their husbands' abilities to parent and discipline their children? Is respect an aspect of this perception, or are there other factors that weigh on mothers' willingness to allow their husbands to be involved in parental behaviors and responsibilities with their stepchildren?

Wallerstein and Lewis (2007) found that mothers in stepfamilies tend to not intervene even when they disagree with how their husbands disciplined their children or felt the stepfathers were unfair. Can maternal gatekeeping be seen as a continuum, with one end representing those mothers who exert strong maternal gatekeeping behaviors, and on the other end are those mothers who are willing to relinquish full parental authority to the stepfathers? Are there

common, identifiable characteristics of mothers who are at various points on the maternal gatekeeping spectrum?

How do mothers see their gatekeeping behaviors differing between their first husbands (their children's biological fathers) and their second husbands (their children's stepfathers), and to what do they ascribe any differences? Are mothers aware of gatekeeping behaviors, and if so, are they cognizant of their reasons for engaging in such behaviors? Do mothers perceive that their gatekeeping has served a positive function within their stepfamilies? Are mothers aware of emotional friction or distance that has been created between themselves and their husbands, or between their husbands and the children as a result of the gatekeeping behaviors?

How do stepfathers describe their perceptions of their wives gatekeeping behaviors? Are they comfortable with their roles and responsibilities in the lives of their stepchildren? What have been some of the outcomes of such gatekeeping? If stepfathers have encountered restrictive gatekeeping, what were their reactions/responses? What impact, if any, has the mother's gatekeeping had upon the stepfather's relationship with his stepchildren? Have gatekeeping behaviors modified, either increasing or decreasing, over time? What, if any, impact have such behaviors had upon the marital relationship?

Another possibility is that mothers' need to serve as gatekeepers between their husbands and their children might be a response to perceived societal norms or expectations that a mother's primary role is to nurture and protect her children. In addition, maternal gatekeeping might be viewed as an expression of maternal instinct. Neither perspective has been explored. Exploration of mothers' felt needs to serve as gatekeepers would provide a better understanding of and appreciation for a mother's role, especially within a stepfamily.

Participants in this study had broad and inclusive views of family that included parents, siblings, grandparents, family friends, stepparents, half-siblings, pets, and wife's ex-husband. This inclusive perspective of family was found to be an important contributing factor to the success and commitment of these stepfamilies. Especially the mothers in this study reported being intentionally inclusive with their children at the beginning of their relationships with their future stepfathers about how their fathers were still part of the family, and that the stepfathers were to be additional members. The children also became very close to grandparents, extended family, and family friends who were very involved in their lives during the time of the mothers' transitions through the stages of divorcing, single parenting, and remarrying. Those experiences early in the life of the stepfamily combined with the modeling that occurred resulted in children who were cared for by people who became significant in their lives, and the caring was reciprocated. The children in this study in particular expressed positive sentiments about the large number of people involved in their lives, and grew up knowing that it was okay to have two different types of fathers playing similar yet different roles in their lives.

The centrality of respect in the formation of stepfamily relationships and the mothers' role in modeling that respect provides new insight into successful stepfamily formation. Further inquiry into this subject on a larger scale is necessary to verify the pertinence of respect in stepfamily formation and to provide a more in-depth understanding of respect beyond the two families in this study. Future research could target those stepfamilies of similar marital duration, but whose children were older at the time of family formation. Because the theme of respect within stepfamilies is new to the literature, research into how respect develops or evolves would be enlightening. For example, a follow up with the stepfamilies in this study might entail questions regarding the role of respect in the mothers' families of origin, the mothers' definitions

of respect, and so forth. Qualitative enquiry is recommended to allow respondents the freedom to describe their own experiences and the meanings those experiences have for them (Patton, 2002).

### *Implications for Family Life Educators and Stepfamilies*

Although the implications resulting from this study are somewhat limited due to the size of the sample, certain findings can provide beneficial insight and information to family life educators, social workers, family therapists, and others who serve stepfamilies. Professionals providing support groups or education classes for divorcing or recently divorced parents, as well as those providing premarital counseling for those contemplating remarriage, need to recognize and explore the importance of the mother in helping her children make healthy family transitions. For example, parents would benefit by understanding the importance of the mother maintaining a positive attitude toward the child's biological father, as well as making the effort to facilitate a positive relationship between biological fathers and their children.

The need for healthy transitions, which allow children slow but increasing access to their future stepfathers, while also allowing the children sufficient freedom to create their own relationships with their stepfathers, could be emphasized and practical steps suggested. It is important that educators help make prospective stepfamilies aware, contrary to the Normal Family Perspective, stepfamilies do not need to assume certain roles or behaviors in order to act like intact, biological families. This study found that successful stepfamilies shape their roles and role expectations over time, making slow but ultimately successful transitions. Educating individuals who are divorcing or considering remarriage about the critical roles mothers have in helping their new husbands, children, and ex-husbands work out healthy and positive relationships would give couples a common understanding of their future roles in adjustment.

Previously divorced participants in this study relied on a variety of networks and programs to sustain and support them following their divorces. While family was a part of that support for some, divorce programs, support groups, and educational opportunities enabled them to move forward in their lives and subsequent family formation. Divorce and an ensuing period of single parenting can be times of stress and challenge for mothers, potentially affecting mental and emotional health (Zimmerman et al., 2004).

Those with family or other social networks may find needed help and support there within those relationships. However, if the mother is new to an area, does not have reliable social networks, or feels somehow marginalized or rejected because of her divorce may have few resources upon which to draw for emotional support. In addition, mothers who go through divorce often face significant financial challenges (Stewart, 2007), may need affordable legal advice or information, adequate child care, and some type of divorce support group. When contemplating remarriage, mothers may need educational opportunities in order to make informed decisions and take appropriate steps toward adjustment.

The implication for those providing social services is the broad range of opportunities to be of assistance to the number of individuals attempting to negotiate divorce, single parenting, and remarriage. Family professionals need to establish learning programs and support networks for those members of the community facing such challenges. Furthermore, this study illustrates the importance of finding increasingly effective ways of communicating the availability of those services to the public. While not all divorcing mothers may need or want additional assistance, for the mothers in this study such supports made a major contribution to their successful transition through that period of their lives.

### *Conclusion*

This study was undertaken to gain new insights and perspectives into the role of the least studied member of American stepfamilies – the biological mother. The focus of this study was on successful stepfamilies, discovering their strengths and the describing the challenges they overcame. A further positive aspect was that all family members were given equal voice in contributing to the project. Symbolic interaction and family systems theories provided the lenses through which the data were viewed.

Results indicate that the mothers in this study made major contributions to the success of their families. Underlying the behaviors they exhibited were the attitudes they modeled which were positive and respectful. The mothers helped facilitate a positive relationship between their children and the children's stepfathers.

In the movie, Tess and Anna came to new perspectives as a result of magically exchanging bodies for a day. Through Anna's eyes, Tess realized that she had a responsibility to consider and provide for her children's emotional needs as well as her own, that the integration of the stepfather could not be rushed and that her children needed time to adjust. Anna, seeing the situation from her mother's perspective, came to the understanding that her mother was not trying to replace her biological father, but rather allowing her future stepfather to create a new place for himself within the family. Unaided by magical intervention, and taking months and years instead of a few hours, the members of the stepfamilies in this study came to similar understandings and now describe themselves as successful families.

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APPENDIX A:  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions for the Stepfather

I would like to know about the family in which you are involved. I am trying to learn about successful stepfamilies and I think you can help me. We are going to start by talking about the present.

1. Tell me the story of your family, and I would also like to ask you to diagram it for me.
2. So, based on this information, when do you think the members currently in your household became a family? Thank you. Now let's talk about the past.
3. Describe your relationship with your biological children after your previous (marriage/ relationship) dissolved? Describe for me how your relationship with them has changed since then?
4. Describe your relationship with your stepchildren before you married their mom. What were your perceptions of the (focus child's) reaction to the idea of their mom getting remarried? How has your relationship with (focus child) changed over time?
5. How do you think (focus child) would answer the question, "What effects did your mom's divorce and remarriage have upon you?"
6. What influence did your wife's children have on your marriage plans? What influence did your (biological ) children have on your remarriage plans?
7. Before you became a stepfather, what were your perceptions of stepfathers in general? Describe for me how those perceptions were formed.
8. Describe for me how you saw yourself in the role of stepfather before you were married?  
(Clarifying question: What were your expectations of how you would function as a

- stepfather to her children?) Describe for me how you saw your roles as father of your biological children and stepfather of (your wife's) children working together?
9. What were (your wife's) specific expectations of you as a husband? When did you become aware of those expectations? Describe for me how she communicated those expectations to you?
  10. What were (your wife's) specific expectations of you as a parent? Describe for me how she communicated those expectations to you?
  11. What were your specific expectations of (Name) as a wife? What were your specific expectations of (Name) as a parent?
  12. Describe any conversations you had before your marriage about her expectations of your involvement in the discipline of her children?
  13. Describe any differences there may have been in your expectations of each other.
  14. Describe for me any conversations you had before you were married about your expectations of your involvement in the discipline of her children?
  15. Before you and (Name) were married, would you describe for me how you prepared for your new role as stepfather?
  16. What did (wife's name) do before you were married to prepare her children for life together as a stepfamily in terms of daily living?
  17. What was your perception of the (focus child's) expectations of you as a disciplinarian?
  18. Traditions are such an important part of all families. Describe the process you used as a family to agree on those traditions.
  19. Taking into consideration the success you have had in your stepfamily experience: - -

- Describe anything you wish you would have known before you remarried in regard to adjusting to your new role as stepfather?
  - Describe anything you wish your wife would have done differently in regard to helping the children adjust to you as their new stepfather?
  - Describe anything you wish you would have known before you remarried in regard to helping the children adjust to you?
20. If there was one thing you could have done differently in the process of remarriage and stepfamily adjustment, what would it have been?
21. What advice would you give to someone else who is considering becoming a stepfather?
22. What advice would you give a woman with children who is about to marry a man who will become a stepfather?

### Questions for the Mother

We are trying to learn about successful stepfamilies and we think you can help us.

1. Tell me the story of your family, and I would also like to ask you to diagram it for me.
2. So, based on this information, when do you think the members currently in your household became a family? Thank you. Now, let's talk about the past.
3. How did (name of child) act/react when you and your ex began the process of divorce? How do you think (name of child) would answer the question, "How did it make you feel when your mom and dad divorced?"
4. Describe your relationship with the children during the time you were single, and not yet dating.
5. Describe your relationship with the children during the time you were dating and preparing for remarriage.

6. What were your perceptions of (name of child)'s relationship with (name of stepfather) before remarriage? After remarriage? Now?
7. How involved was (name of child) in your relationship with (name of stepfather) when you first began dating?
8. How did (name of child) influence your decision to remarry?
9. How did the children approach you with issues or concerns about (name of stepfather) before remarriage? After remarriage? Now?
10. Before you were married, can you describe for me:
  - What were your specific expectations of (name of husband) as a husband?  
Describe for me any conversations you may have had with (name of husband) before you were married about your expectations regarding his role as a husband.
  - What were your specific expectations of (name of husband) as a parent?  
Describe the conversations you had with (name of husband) before you were married about your expectations of him as a parent.
11. Describe conversations you had regarding his financial role in the family.
12. Describe conversations you had concerning his support for your parenting.
13. Describe conversations you had talking about discipline for the children. For example, describe the type of agreement you reached regarding who, when, and what disciplinary measures were to be taken? What about discipline of his children when they are in the household – describe for me the similarities and differences.

Thank you; now let us shift to talking about (target child), still from a past perspective:

14. What kinds of things did you do to prepare (name of child) for his/her relationship with his/her soon-to-be new stepfather?
15. In what ways did you prepare (name of child) regarding any possible changes in discipline?
16. What types of things did you do to prepare (name of child) about what she/he should expect after the remarriage concerning his/her relationship with (name of stepfather). Expounding on that, can you describe a specific example of what you did to prepare (name of child) in terms of any expectations you might have of him/her in regards to (name of stepfather)?
17. What did you notice about the (name of child)'s behavior before and after the remarriage? (If not covered, probe: Behavior at school? Behavior at home?)

Moving to the present:

18. How would you currently describe the atmosphere in your family?
19. What do you think you have done to help the members in your family work well together?
20. How well do you think (name of child) has adjusted to the stepfamily configuration?
21. What language/words does (name of child) use in referring to (name of stepfather)?  
Describe for me the process used to arrive at this terminology.
22. Traditions are such an important part of families. What traditions do you have in your stepfamily?
  - Are they new, or carried forward from past family experiences?
  - How are they similar than traditions you may have had before starting your stepfamily?

- How are they different than traditions you may have had before starting your stepfamily?

23. Please describe anything that you would do again and that worked well in regard to helping the children to adjust to (name of stepfather).

24. If you were going to give words of advice to a mother who is about to remarry, what would they be? Specifically advice concerning (name of child)?

### Questions for the Child

I would like to know about your family. I am trying to learn about your special family and I think you can help me.

1. Tell me the story of your family. Also, please draw a picture of your family for me.
  - a. Is there anyone else you consider part of your family?
  - b. I need to label the people in the drawing to help me remember. Please tell me what you call each of these individuals, and write that above their place on the drawing. For example, do you call your sister sissy, or her first name?
  - c. I would also like to add one more item to this drawing and please give it a title or name for me.

Now let us talk about the past:

2. Please tell me who was in your family before your mom and (use name given by child for stepfather, or if stepfather is not included in the family by the child, ask how the child refers to the mom's husband) were married? Please also draw a picture including all of these individuals.
  - a. Thank you. Would you please also give a title or name to this drawing?
3. Describe for me how you felt when your mom and dad didn't live together anymore.

4. Tell me about where you lived after your mom and dad's divorce. What was it like for you?
5. Describe for me how you felt when your mom first started talking about marrying (stepfather). What did you think about that?
  - a. Tell me about how you were involved in the decision for your mom to marry your (stepfather).
  - b. Describe for me anything your mom said to get you ready for your (stepfather) to come into the household.
  - c. How would you describe your relationship with (stepfather)?
6. Kids have a variety of emotions when their mother or father remarries. How did you feel when your mom and (stepfather) got married?
7. How did you find out your mom was going to remarry? How did that make you feel?
8. How did your life change after (stepfather) married your mother?
9. How did your relationship with your mom change after her marriage to (stepfather)?
10. How did your relationship change with your dad after (stepfather) married your mother?
11. How did your relationship with (stepfather) change after he married your mother?
12. Tell me what your chores are in this family.
13. Who in your family decides what your chores are?
  - a. How are they different now than they were before your mom and (stepfather) got married?
  - b. How are the rules made in your family?
  - c. How do you know what the rules are in the family?
  - d. How do you help the family in other ways besides chores?

14. Describe for me how you get along with your sisters and brothers.
  - a. How are the rules the same for you and your brothers and sisters/
15. What is your favorite way to spend time with your mom?
  - a. How is your relationship different with your mom now than when your mom was single?
    - i. Can you think of a specific example to help me understand?
16. What is your favorite way to spend time with your (stepfather)?
17. Please describe feelings you have when you think about your family.
  - a. How are they different now than when your mom and (stepfather) first got married?
18. How do you feel when you see your mom and (stepfather) together?
19. How are other adults involved in your life?
20. If there is a fight in the family, what is it usually about, and who does the fighting?
21. If you are upset about something what do you usually do? For example, if you are having trouble at school, would you ask an adult for help, or would you talk to your friends?
  - a. List any adult you trust to help you when you are upset.
22. How does your family celebrate holidays?
  - a. How does your family celebrate your birthday in particular?
23. If you could talk to another child about to enter a stepfamily, what would you tell them?

APPENDIX B:  
PARTICIPANTS

Family A:

Alan – Stepfather of Annette; biological father of Alisha; married to Anna.

Alisha – 7-year-old daughter of Anna and Alan.

Anna – Mother of Annette and Alisha; married to Alan; previously married to Arnold.

Annette – 14-year-old daughter of Anna and her first husband, Arnold.

Arnold – Biological father of Annette; Anna’s first husband.

Family B:

Betty – Mother of Brian; married to Bob; previously married to Boris.

Bob – Stepfather of Brian; married to Betty.

Boris – Biological father of Brian; Betty’s first husband.

Brian – 14-year-old son of Betty and her first husband, Boris.