

# 11

## No Longer Understudied, but Still Misunderstood

### Expanding Communication Research on Stepfamily Relationships

*Paul Schrodt and Dawn O. Braithwaite*

*This is the first time to be a family. This is the first time that he [stepfather] had his stuff there and my mom had her stuff there. . . . There is no desensitizing to that point. I wasn't ready for that shock and you just arrive there, plus in a different town, in a different school, and you are start[ing] school yourself. So, it was a very big letdown and to be a family . . . all of this at once.*

*Young adult stepchild, Braithwaite,  
Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman (2001)*

*I adore Jim. I despised Bill. Greta was great. Laura I did like; I disagree with her on a lot of stuff, but I did really get along with her. And Babbette just isn't a pleasant person.*

*Nina, about her stepparents, Ganong,  
Coleman, & Jamison (2011)*

*When I went into the marriage I was still trying to recreate a nuclear family . . . always trying to control everything, make everything okay. If everything could be okay, then there wouldn't be any conflict . . . I don't know what nuclear family is, but those were my delusions.*

*Mother from a stepfamily,  
Weaver & Coleman (2010)*

As these excerpts illustrate, the stepfamily represents one of the most challenging family forms to understand and study. Defined as a family in which “at least one of the adults has a child (or children) from a previous relationship” (Ganong & Coleman, 2004, p. 2), stepfamilies involve an array of personal relationships that vary considerably in form, structure, and complexity. Census data suggest that 4.2 million stepchildren live in the United States, representing 7.4% of all married couple households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010c). These estimates represent underestimates, however, because the census relies on a household definition that is based on co-residence, one that ignores the complexity of stepfamily systems and the relationships they include (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). Correcting for this definitional limitation, as of 2000, stepfamilies represented 13% of all families in the U.S. (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008) and 15% of children under the age of 18 lived in a stepfamily formed by remarriage (Stewart, 2007). More important than the sheer prevalence of stepfamilies, however, are the challenges and opportunities that stepfamilies create for the members who live in them, the practitioners who work with them, and the scholars who study them. Consequently, social scientists from a variety of disciplines have devoted the better part of three decades investigating stepfamily relationships in the hopes of furthering our theoretical and pragmatic understandings of how stepfamilies function (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Sweeney, 2010).

In Floyd and Morman's (2006) first anthology, we identified the stepfamily as both an understudied and misunderstood family form. We prefaced our review of stepfamily communication research with four observations: (a) the stepfamily is an important and expanding family form worthy of scholarly attention, (b) stepfamilies are one context in which researchers and practitioners from a variety of disciplines can collaborate to make a difference, (c) a focus on communication is important to clinical practitioners and researchers alike, and (d) scholars need to shift their focus away from only looking at problems with stepfamilies and consider the strengths and coping processes that facilitate resiliency in stepfamilies (Braithwaite, Schrodtt, & Baxter, 2006). These four observations remain just as relevant today as they

did six years ago, and the good news is that communication research on stepfamily relationships has grown exponentially since our initial review, mirroring the larger social scientific trend (e.g., Sweeney, 2010). Thus, the stepfamily may no longer represent an *understudied* family form per se, though in many ways it remains very much *misunderstood*.

In this chapter, we review the most notable trends to emerge in stepfamily communication research over the last decade. Our primary goal is not to provide a comprehensive and exhaustive review of the stepfamily literature that exists elsewhere (e.g., Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2012; Sweeney, 2010), nor is it to revisit those studies that we reviewed in Floyd and Morman's (2006) first anthology, but rather to identify the most recent contributions that family scholars have made to our understanding of the *communication process* in stepfamily relationships. Scholars with a central focus on stepfamily communication are advancing research that centers on communication as the primary, constitutive social process by which relationships are formed and enacted (cf. Baxter, 2004). With this in mind, we begin our review by discussing the various ways in which family communication scholars have expanded our *theoretical* understanding of stepfamily relationships. We then review some of the *methodological* advancements within this body of research. Finally, we conclude our chapter with a set of new directions that future scholars can take to advance the recent proliferation of stepfamily scholarship that has emerged over the past decade.

## Theoretical Expansions to Stepfamily Communication Research

One of the more common misunderstandings about stepfamilies, both for the family members who live in them and the researchers who study them, is that they should function like first-marriage families. Historically, researchers investigating stepfamily relationships have typically done so using a “deficit-comparison” approach (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). This approach relies on a model of the conventional, nuclear family as the theoretical framework against which the stepfamily is found to be deficient and problematic. In other words, family scholars have had a tendency in the past to examine the behaviors and processes that are problematic in stepfamilies by comparing such processes to those found in first-marriage families. This is oftentimes done at the expense of examining the behaviors that promote growth and resilience in stepfamilies (Afifi, 2008). That being said, the stepfamily remains, in many ways, an incomplete institution (Cherlin, 1978), given the lack of relational history among family members, the dearth of

relational norms to guide communication and relational development, and the ambiguous family boundaries that emerge as a function of relational uncertainty between family members.

Despite these challenges, however, many stepfamilies adapt to their changing environment and develop new ways of communicating and relating that help facilitate healthy stepfamily functioning. Rather than viewing stepfamilies as incomplete institutions, focusing on stepfamily deficits and indirectly stigmatizing them as “less than” first-marriage families, Pryor (2008) argued that scholars should instead focus on the sources of strength and resiliency that characterize well-functioning stepfamilies. Consequently, family communication scholars have largely abandoned the deficit-comparison approach and expanded our theoretical understanding of how stepfamily relationships develop by adopting alternative theoretical frameworks useful for elucidating stepfamily communication processes. In what follows, we identify three theoretical frameworks primarily responsible for the recent growth in stepfamily communication research: family systems theory, relational dialectics theory, and symbolic interactionism. We then briefly review other communication theories scholars have used to expand our understanding of stepfamily relationships before turning our attention to methodological advancements within this body of work.

### Family Systems Theory, Risk, and Resilience in Stepfamilies

Family systems theory focuses our attention on the holistic nature of interaction patterns (Minuchin, 1974). As such, system theorists have identified seven key characteristics or tenets that characterize all family systems (see Galvin, Dickson, & Marrow, 2006). Although addressing all seven tenets lies well beyond the scope of this chapter, scholars investigating stepfamily communication have relied primarily on three guiding principles to frame their research on risk and resiliency in stepfamilies. First, the principle of *interdependence* implies that the stepfamily operates as a highly connected web of personal relationships where each stepfamily member depends on every other stepfamily member to sustain the stepfamily system. Second, family systems theory focuses on *complex relationships*, or the idea that every (step)family system is organized into numerous interpersonal subsystems (e.g., remarried couple, stepparent-stepchild, nonresidential parent-child, etc.), as well as the interpersonal dynamics between and among them. Finally, family systems seek to maintain a state of balance (or *homeostasis*), and thus, changes to the family structure and the reorganization that occurs in the wake of divorce (or death) and remarriage (or cohabitation) require adaptation so as to return to healthy family functioning (Minuchin, 1974).

Relying primarily on these three principles, Tamara Afifi (formerly Golish) and her colleagues (Afifi, 2003; Afifi & Keith, 2004; Afifi, 2008; Golish, 2003) have advanced a program of research identifying the communication strengths that differentiate strong stepfamilies from those struggling with the developmental process. To begin, she identified seven primary challenges facing stepfamilies regardless of their strength (Golish, 2003): (1) "feeling caught," (2) regulating boundaries with a noncustodial family, (3) ambiguity of parental roles, (4) "traumatic bonding," (5) vying for resources, (6) discrepancies in conflict management styles, and (7) building solidarity as a family unit. In order to manage these challenges, however, strong stepfamilies were more likely than struggling stepfamilies to use a variety of communication tactics, including more everyday talk among family members, greater levels of disclosure and openness, communicating clear rules and boundaries, engaging in family problem solving, spending time together as a family, and promoting a positive image of the noncustodial parent. Her results demonstrated that the communication process is central to the creation and maintenance of a strong stepfamily, so much so that skilled family members may help facilitate the adjustment that all stepfamilies go through by adapting their communication activities to the needs of individual family members and to the needs of the stepfamily as a whole.

To further illustrate this idea, Afifi and Keith (2004) interviewed 81 stepfamily members to examine the ambiguous loss they experienced as members of post-divorce stepfamilies. "Ambiguous loss refers to a unique kind of loss where a loved one is technically present but functionally absent, creating a lack of closure and clarity" (Afifi & Keith, 2004, p. 67). As is often the case with divorce and remarriage, the status of relationships and the emotional connections that family members have with one another can become unclear. Afifi and Keith identified three types of ambiguous loss in post-divorce stepfamilies: (a) the loss of one's previous family form and the traditional nuclear family ideal, (b) the loss of a single-parent bond after the stepparent entered the household, and (c) the loss of intimacy and trust between noncustodial parents (primarily fathers) and their children. They then developed a risk and resiliency model of ambiguous loss in post-divorce stepfamilies that included a number of adaptive responses to the loss, such as continual contact with the noncustodial parent, everyday talk, positive coparental communication, and distancing from societal role prescriptions, to name a few.

In addition, researchers have also examined how communication patterns unfold within and across the various subsystems that exist within a stepfamily. For instance, Baxter, Braithwaite, and Bryant (2006) described four different types of communication triads that young-adult stepchildren perceived in their stepfamilies. In the most frequently occurring triad among

the four, the *linked triad*, stepchildren wanted their residential parent to function as an intermediary between themselves and the stepparent, fulfilling the roles of transmitter, interpreter, advocate, and/or protector. Likewise, stepchildren who experienced the *outsider triad* reported feeling very close to their residential parent, yet unlike those in the linked triad, they recognized only limited interdependence with the stepparent. In essence, the stepparent was an absent presence—physically present but relationally irrelevant to the stepchild's everyday life. In the *adult-coalition triad*, stepchildren perceived that their relationship with the residential parent had been compromised due to the parent's loyalty to his/her spouse. As a result, communication with the residential parent was characterized by suspicion and a fear that the parent would "side with" the stepparent. The fourth and final triadic communication structure was the *completed triad*. Although this triad included functional, positive relationships among all three members (i.e., stepchild, stepparent, residential parent) and a sense of "real family" with open communication, it appeared least frequently in Baxter et al.'s (2006) data. Together, these four triadic communication structures provide further insight into how different kinds of (step)parent-(step)child relationships emerge from the unique and combined communication patterns of the stepfamily system.

Wanting to better understand the triangulation, stress, and coping that often occurs in stepfamily systems, Afifi and Schrodt (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007; Schrodt & Ledbetter, 2007, 2012) conducted a series of studies identifying the antecedents and outcomes associated with "feeling caught" in stepfamilies. Children who feel caught between their parents often feel "put in the middle," "torn," or forced to defend their loyalty to each of their parents (Afifi, 2003; Amato & Afifi, 2006). Such feelings typically emerge when children become privy to their parents' disputes, are the recipients of negative or inappropriate disclosures, and when they become messengers or mediators of information between their parents (Afifi, 2003).

Although feeling caught is endemic to post-divorce families in general, remarriages occur and are maintained under the watchful eyes of third parties who hold a vested interest in the quality and stability of the stepfamily system, namely children from prior relationships and former spouses (Ganong, Coleman, & Hans, 2006). More importantly, feeling caught typically induces a level of stress that reduces mental health and well-being. For instance, Schrodt and Afifi (2007) found that interparental aggression, demand/withdraw patterns, and negative disclosures all positively predicted young adults' feelings of being caught between their parents, which in turn negatively predicted family satisfaction and mental health. Likewise, Schrodt and Ledbetter (2007, 2012) found that young-adult children from divorced

families (many of whom were members of stepfamilies) reported higher levels of stress, lower levels of self-esteem, reduced mental health, and lower levels of family satisfaction when they felt caught between their parents. However, some preliminary evidence suggests that parents can help buffer their children from the deleterious effects of feeling caught by strengthening their individual relationships with each child and communicating with them in a confirming manner (Schrodt & Ledbetter, 2012).

Of course, stepchildren are not the only ones who experience heightened stress and reduced family satisfaction as a function of living in a stepfamily system. For instance, Johnson et al. (2008) tested a hypothesized model of stepmother stress that included the presence (or absence) of biological children, a social support network, disparities in household chores, and role clarity as predictors of perceived stress and marital satisfaction. Their results indicated that living with at least one biological child, experiencing disparities in household chore responsibilities, and a lack of role clarity induced stress, which in turn negatively predicted stepmothers' marital satisfaction.

Collectively, then, communication scholars adopting a family systems lens have enhanced our understanding of how stepfamily members communicate with each other in response to the stress of adapting to their changing family environments. However, family systems theory and theories of risk and resiliency are not the only frameworks useful for elucidating the inherent tensions associated with stepfamily relationships. For example, Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, and Jones (2008) adopted a dialectical perspective to examine the discourses surrounding stepchildren's feelings of being caught between their parents. Their investigation is one of several that have relied on relational dialectics theory to explore stepfamily communication. Therefore, in the next section, we summarize recent research that has used a dialectical perspective to better understand the contradictions and competing discourses that animate stepfamily relationships.

### Relational Dialectics Theory, Contradictions, and Communication in Stepfamilies

Relational dialectics theory (RDT) views relating as a dialogic process; a communicative process characterized by the intersection of oppositional tendencies that constitute a relationship (Baxter, 2004, 2011). From this perspective, scholars can better understand how family members relate to each other by identifying the primary struggles and contradictions that animate their communication. As Baxter (2006) explained, "The dialogic move is one of recognizing that family life is a both/and experience—families gain their meaning from the give-and-take interplay of multiple, competing

themes or perspectives, for example, the discourse of ‘intimacy’ and the discourse of ‘independence’” (p. 131). Researchers using this theory focus on the constitutive nature of communication and the joint communicative actions of relating parties as they co-create both the relationship and themselves (Baxter, 2004; Braithwaite et al., 2008). For example, RDT would approach the stepparent-stepchild relationship not from an “either-or” perspective (e.g., more close versus less close or that family members should reveal or not reveal their feelings to each other), but from a dialogic of “both-and,” for example to understand how stepparents and children manage struggles over what children need to know. “From this dialogic standpoint, the stepparent-stepchild relationship is viewed as a system of substantial complexity, characterized by both satisfaction and dissatisfaction, both conflict and cooperation, both closeness and distance, and so forth” (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004, p. 449). Thus, communication scholars have found RDT to be a fruitful theory for understanding the complex, multivocal interactions of stepfamilies.

Most of the RDT research on stepfamily relationships to date has coalesced around identifying the contradictions that animate discursive struggles in (a) stepparent-stepchild relationships, (b) nonresidential parents’ relationships with their children, (c) co-parenting relationships, and (d) stepfamily rituals. For instance, Baxter et al. (2004) explored the dialectical tensions that permeated the discourse of stepparent-stepchild relationships and identified three underlying contradictions. First, stepchildren wanted emotional closeness and a relationship with their stepparent. At the same time, their discourse reflected the desire for emotional distance out of feelings of loyalty to their old family, particularly the nonresidential parent. Second, stepchildren wanted communication that reflected openness with the stepparent and, at the same time, they eschewed such open communication. Third, stepchildren’s discourse revealed a dialectical tension of desiring parental authority to rest only in the residential parent, yet at the same time, they often wanted discipline from their stepparent as well. Consequently, these competing discourses created tremendous ambivalence in the stepchild-stepparent relationship (Baxter et al., 2004).

Communication scholars have also used RDT to enlighten the relationships and interactions of nonresidential parents and their children. For instance, Braithwaite and Baxter (2006) interviewed young adult stepchildren and identified interrelated discourses of parenting and nonparenting, coupled with openness and closedness. Although it seems reasonable to expect that most children would want a close parent-child relationship with their nonresidential parent (usually a father), the children in their sample were quite ambivalent when their nonresidential father or mother tried to



parent them. At times, they perceived that the nonresidential parent did not have the experience or background in the child's daily life to be helpful to them. Moreover, stepchildren's discourse reflected the desire for intimate and open communication with their nonresidential parent, while at the same time they often found openness difficult.

In a similar vein, researchers have used RDT to reveal the complexities of the co-parenting relationship in stepfamilies, particularly as this relationship unfolds and affects the well-being of children. For example, Braithwaite et al. (2008) conducted focus-group discussions with young-adult stepchildren on what it meant to feel caught between parents. These researchers heard competing discourses wherein children wanted to be centered in the attention of their parents, and at the same time wanted to avoid being caught in the middle, as exemplified by one young-adult stepchild who talked about feeling "like a bone between two dogs." Using RDT, Braithwaite et al. argued that stepchildren's desires to be centered were animated by managing two inter-related dialectical tensions of freedom-constraint and openness-closedness. Stepchildren struggled with communication from one or both parents that constrained the possibility of being centered without being caught, for example, when one parent critiqued the other in front of the child. This was tied to the second contradiction of openness-closedness, as children wanted enough information from their parents to be able to know what was going on, and at the same time desired closedness from their parents, not wanting to hear information that made them feel uncomfortable.

Finally, Baxter et al. (2009) extended earlier research on the dialectical nature of stepfamily rituals (e.g., Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998) by exploring stepchildren's perceptions of the remarriage ceremony. They identified six types of ritual enactments, five of which celebrated the couple's marriage and just one which paid homage to the new stepfamily as a whole. More importantly, they found three factors that led stepchildren to find the remarriage ceremony empty—that is, not positive or meaningful for them. First, stepchildren described the remarriage as empty if it included a ritual form that was either too traditional (e.g., a white wedding) or not traditional enough. In other words, they expressed a desire for the remarriage ceremony to have some elements of a traditional wedding, but not too many. Second, stepchildren perceived the remarriage as an empty ritual when they themselves found it difficult to legitimate the remarriage. In fact, most of the stepchildren in Baxter et al.'s (2009) study were not supportive of the remarriage, which undermined its legitimacy and furthered its "emptiness." Third, and perhaps most importantly, the meaningfulness of the remarriage ceremony was contingent upon the type and extent of involvement that stepchildren experienced prior to, and during, the ceremony itself. Baxter et al.

(2009) found that a fully meaningful remarriage ritual allowed stepchildren to participate in a way that paid homage to their role as a member of the new stepfamily without delegitimizing their family of origin. Their results further confirmed Braithwaite et al.'s (1998) finding that the most productive ritual enactments were oriented to the management of the dialectical struggles between the “old” and the “new” experienced by family members.

Overall, RDT has enabled communication scholars to identify and describe some of the unique challenges that animate various kinds of discourses in stepfamily relationships. One of the key conclusions to emerge from this body of work is that stepfamilies often experience a functional ambivalence that manifests itself in the communication of family members as they (re)negotiate (step)family relationships and enact both “old” and “new” roles (Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2010). This ambivalence has implications for both the individual and relational identities of different family members. In newer developments with RDT, the theory is taking a decidedly critical turn (Baxter, 2011) and this will help scholars enlighten the discursive struggles stepfamilies face and highlight which discourses are marginalized in these family relationships. Although RDT has helped illuminate the communicative ambivalence that stepfamily members experience in their relationships, it is not the only theory useful for exploring changes in personal and relational identities. In the next section, we briefly review a third nexus of research on stepfamily relationships that has relied more generally on some of the underlying principles of symbolic interactionism.

## Symbolic Interactionism, Stepfamily Roles, and Address Terms

Symbolic interactionism (SI) focuses on the various ways in which humans acquire their individual and relational identities through social interaction (Mead, 1934; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2006). People respond to the meanings they construct as they interact with one another. Although they are influenced by the culture and society in which they live, they are also active agents who are instrumental in producing the culture and society that influences them. SI provides a number of concepts and principles that enable scholars to pay attention to the intersections of human language, identity, social interaction, and society. For instance, a SI perspective suggests that as we interact with *particular others* (i.e., those individuals in our lives who are significant to us), we gain an understanding of what things mean to them and how they assign meaning to various experiences. We then import their perspectives into our own self-concepts as we develop our own individual identities. This process of internalizing the perspectives of others

and viewing experience from their perspectives is referred to as *role taking* (Mead, 1934). Consequently, stepfamily researchers have recently explored how communication facilitates role taking and the address terms that family members use to identify different members within the stepfamily. While their research comes from various research paradigms and is not always grounded in SI per se, they share a focus on how we acquire and enact roles in stepfamily life.

For example, Weaver and Coleman (2010) explored the various roles and tensions associated with motherhood in stepfather households. They found that when conflicts arose between their children and their spouse, mothers often sided with their children and engaged in one of four protective behaviors: defender, gatekeeper, mediator, and interpreter. More importantly, they identified several factors that influenced how mothers talked about, and enacted, their roles, including (a) an often unrealistic expectation that they could re-create a “family” that mirrored a first-marriage, nuclear family, (b) a tendency to rationalize their attempts to exclude their husbands from parenting the children, (c) and role conflict, as many of the women talked about feeling caught between partners and children and/or feeling fragmented at some time in the marriage. Taken together, Weaver and Coleman’s (2010) results further illustrate the idea that “People are in the constant process of both ‘taking’ and ‘making’ roles in their everyday interactions with others” (p. 309).

In a slightly different vein, Ganong, Coleman, and Jamison (2011) recently interviewed emerging adult stepchildren about their relationship-building and maintaining behaviors with their stepparents. They developed a grounded theory of stepchild-stepparent relationship development that includes six different trajectories: (a) accepting as a parent, (b) liking from the start, (c) accepting with ambivalence, (d) changing trajectory, (e) rejecting, and (f) coexisting. Not only do their results lend further evidence to the functional ambivalence that often characterizes stepfamily relationships (cf. Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2010), but they further illustrate how communication and structural features of stepfamilies work in concert to shape the relational identities of stepchildren and stepparents.

A common, yet taken for granted symbolic activity that holds tremendous implications for the individual and relational identities of stepfamily members is the use of address terms. For instance, Kellas, LeClair-Underberg, and Normand (2008) found that nearly two thirds of the stepchildren in their sample varied the terms of address they used to identify their stepfamily members depending on context, audience, and/or relationship. Whether using *formal* address terms that defined the person in reference to a third party (e.g., “my dad’s wife”), *familiar* terms that included stepparents’ first names

or included the word “step” in reference to the parent or sibling, or *familial* terms that dropped the prefix “step” (e.g., using “mom” instead of “step-mom”), stepchildren engaged in both internal and external code-switching. Such code-switching functioned to communicate solidarity at times, to communicate separateness at other times, and to manage the balance of stepfamily life. Intriguingly, Kellas et al. (2008) found communicative ambivalence in stepchildren’s use of address terms, as address terms were both important and unimportant; sometimes they mattered and sometimes they didn’t.

Overall, then, family communication scholars have eschewed the deficit-comparison approach in favor of exploring the coping and resiliency behaviors that help stepfamilies adapt, the ongoing tensions and contradictions that animate their communication, and the ways in which stepfamily members negotiate their roles and relationships via interaction. Family systems theory, RDT, and symbolic interactionism are not the only theoretical perspectives useful for illuminating stepfamily communication processes, however. For instance, Schrodt (2008) combined general and evolutionary theories of family communication (e.g., Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Floyd & Haynes, 2006) to examine sex differences in stepchildren’s reports of stepfamily functioning. He found that stepchildren who identified a stepfather as their primary stepparent reported less family dissension and avoidance and more family involvement and expressiveness than those who identified a stepmother. Likewise, Mikkelsen, Floyd, and Pauley (2011) used evolutionary theory and the concept of discriminative parental solicitude (Daly & Wilson, 1980) to compare reports of social support among various sibling dyads. Consistent with the theory, participants who reported on a stepsibling relationship reported less emotional support, esteem support, network support, informational support, and tangible support than those participants who reported on a sibling relationship with some degree of a biological tie (i.e., full and half-siblings).

In a completely different vein, DiVerniero (2011) adopted uncertainty management theory (Brashers, 2001) to explore how stepchildren managed their uncertainty regarding their new stepfamilies. Consistent with several of the studies reviewed above, she found that stepchildren’s uncertainty typically revolved around (a) the “old” family, (b) the new stepparent, (c) the new stepsiblings, (d) the new extended stepfamily, (e) stressful events, and (f) rituals. The stepchildren in her study managed their uncertainty by soliciting social support from friends and family, avoiding certain topics and situations in their new stepfamily, and/or accommodating to their parent’s wishes and getting to know their “new” family members.

As is evident from our review thus far, communication scholars have expanded our understanding of stepfamily relationships using a variety of

theoretical perspectives. In addition to these theoretical expansions, however, scholars have also grown in their research designs and in their methodological approaches to studying stepfamily interaction. In the next section, we briefly review some of the more notable methodological advancements to emerge within this body of work. This is not to say that what follows is atheoretical. To the contrary, most of what follows extends some of the theories we have covered thus far, or provides further examples of other theoretical perspectives useful for examining stepfamily relationships (e.g., interdependence theory, structuration theory). Our intent here is to organize our review of this research by highlighting their methodological contributions to stepfamily communication scholarship. In what follows, we briefly review these contributions before concluding our chapter with some future directions for scholars to take.

## Methodological Advancements in the Study of Stepfamily Communication

### Expanding the Units of Analysis in Stepfamily Research

With a few notable exceptions (e.g., Afifi, 2003; Golish, 2003), most communication scholars who study stepfamily relationships have done so largely from the perspective of a single family member. This, of course, raises questions about the limitations associated with our knowledge of stepfamily interaction, particularly when one of the key theories used to frame much of this research (i.e., family systems theory) assumes that the whole of stepfamily interaction is greater than the sum of individual family members' perceptions. To address this limitation, family communication scholars have begun to include multiple family members from the same stepfamily system in their research. Thus, the first methodological advancement worth noting is an increased emphasis on expanding the units of analysis that scholars use when conducting stepfamily research, in effect, moving the unit of analysis from the individual to dyads, triads, and beyond.

Take, for example, the series of studies by Schrodtt and Braithwaite (2011), Schrodtt (2010, 2011), and Schrodtt, Miller, and Braithwaite (2011) exploring the associations among supportive and antagonistic co-parental communication, relational satisfaction, and mental health among various co-parenting dyads within the stepfamily. Using adult dyads from multiple stepfamilies, Schrodtt and Braithwaite found that parents' co-parental communication with their partners (i.e., stepparents) produced a *negative* partner effect on stepparents' mental health. As Schrodtt and Braithwaite reasoned,

stepparents may experience stress and ambivalence as they are called upon to help raise their spouses' offspring. In one sense, being called on to act as a parent may help a residential stepparent feel more like a member of the family, yet in a completely different sense, such reliance on the stepparent in raising the (step)children may foster a heightened sense of stress and ambivalence as he or she navigates role uncertainties and expectations. In a similar manner, Schrodts (2010) examined couples' co-parental communication with nonresidential parents and found that stepparents' supportive co-parental communication with nonresidential parents reduced their own mental health symptoms, but *positively* predicted their partner's mental health symptoms (i.e., indicating poorer mental health for residential parents). Consequently, Schrodts's (2010) results highlight the stress and ambivalence that residential parents may experience as they manage the tensions associated with having their current relational partner co-parent with their ex-spouse.

Having discovered the ambivalence that both residential parents and stepparents feel as they co-parent together, as well as with the nonresidential parent, Schrodts et al. (2011) tested the effects of co-parental communication on ex-spouses' relational satisfaction in stepfamilies. They found that nonresidential parents' supportive and antagonistic co-parental communication with the residential stepparent predicted their own satisfaction with their ex-spouse, as well as their ex-spouses' satisfaction with them. In essence, their findings further demonstrated the interdependence of co-parenting relationships in stepfamilies, as supportive co-parental communication between nonresidential parents and their ex-spouse's new partner (i.e., the stepparent) predicted meaningful variance in relational satisfaction for both ex-spouses.

Finally, Schrodts (2011) investigated co-parental communication and relational satisfaction in residential stepparent/nonresidential parent dyads. He discovered that nonresidential parents' co-parental communication with their ex-spouses (i.e., with residential parents) predicted meaningful variance in stepparents' satisfaction with the nonresidential parent. To the extent that stepparents and nonresidential parents learn to cooperate with each other and work together with the residential parent in childrearing activities, such efforts may ease the stress and anxiety that comes from enacting a new role with a former (or current) partner's new (or former) partner.

In addition to dyadic investigations of co-parental communication in stepfamilies, scholars have also expanded the unit of analysis to include triads. For instance, Afifi's (2003) research on feeling caught in stepfamilies and on stepfamily communication strengths included 90 in-depth interviews from stepparents, parents, and stepchildren living in 30 stepfamilies. More recently,

Schrodt and his colleagues (2007) used a one-with-many design to compare patterns of everyday talk across child-parent, child-stepparent, and child-non-residential parent relationships. They found that children engaged in different kinds of everyday talk (e.g., small talk, catching up, recapping the day's events, etc.) more frequently with residential parents than with residential stepparents or nonresidential parents. However, only two notable differences emerged in stepchildren's everyday talk with residential stepparents and non-residential parents, such that stepchildren engaged in more *love talk* with nonresidential parents than with stepparents but engaged in more *small talk* with stepparents than with nonresidential parents.

Using survey data from stepchildren, parents, and stepparents in 127 stepfamilies, Schrodt, Soliz, and Braithwaite (2008) used a social relations model to provide evidence of dyadic reciprocity in everyday talk and relational satisfaction for stepparents and stepchildren, such that stepparents who engaged in more everyday talk with their stepchildren were more likely to have stepchildren who reported being satisfied in their relationship with their stepparent. As each of these studies illustrates, communication scholars can continue to expand our understanding of stepfamily interaction by including multiple family members from the same family system. Doing so helps enhance the validity of our knowledge about stepfamily interaction, though of course, it also increases the complexity of the analyses and the time and resources needed to gather the data. That being said, family scholars have made recent strides in expanding the methods they use to collect data on stepfamily interaction.

## Expanding Methods of Data Collection on Stepfamily Communication

Historically, communication scholars have relied on qualitative/interpretive methods and the use of in-depth interviews to investigate stepfamily interaction. From the dialectical tensions associated with marital and parental roles in the first stepfamily study in the field (Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990), to the enactment of stepfamily rituals (Baxter et al., 2009; Braithwaite et al., 1998), to the experiences of feeling caught and the communication strengths that help stepfamilies cope (Afifi, 2003; Golish, 2003), interpretive methods have provided tremendous insight and understanding into the various ways in which stepfamily members talk and assign meaning to their experiences. In addition to one-on-one interviews, scholars have used other methods very fruitfully. For instance, Braithwaite and Schrodt (Braithwaite, McBride, & Schrodt, 2003; Schrodt, Baxter, McBride, Braithwaite, & Fine, 2006) used the diary/diary interview method to investigate co-parental communication

patterns in established stepfamilies. They had adults co-raising children keep diaries and answer a series of questions about interactions with the other household for a two-week period and afterward they interviewed each participant. Analyzing their diary data first, Braithwaite et al. (2003) found that most of the interactions among the co-parenting adults in their study were very “business-like” and focused almost exclusively on the children. In their second report using follow-up interviews, Schrodtt et al. (2006) investigated the various ways in which parents and stepparents communicated about the meaning of the divorce decree within their co-parenting relationships. They found that issues of trust, fairness, and good faith were fundamentally tied to how remarried couples used the divorce decree to facilitate or hinder the co-parenting actions of nonresidential parents. They found great value to using diaries to better approximate observation and track the number of messages, communication channels engaged, and the content of everyday interactions.

One expansion to these methods of data collection has been the use of focus groups. For example, Braithwaite et al. (2008) used focus groups to investigate the discourses surrounding stepchildren’s feelings of being caught between their parents. They conducted eight focus groups over a three-month period with young adult stepchildren, and found that not to feel caught in the middle is to feel centered in the family. Specifically, they discovered that stepchildren’s desires to be centered in the family was animated by the dialectical tensions of freedom and constraint, particularly as this tension co-existed with the contradiction of openness and closedness in their (step)parent-child relationships. They discovered the value to researchers of having the stepchildren interacting and bouncing ideas off one another. In addition, the researchers used group work and drawing, as the focus group members designed and drew pictures for a brochure to give parents advice on how to best communicate. The interaction and synergy of focus groups added depth to the study that individual interviews may have missed.

A second expansion has been to analyze the online narratives that stepfamily members post as they navigate the challenges associated with stepfamily development. For instance, Christian (2005) used the online narratives of stepmothers who belonged to an online support group to analyze how this group of stepmothers addressed the myth of the “wicked stepmother” and the stigma associated with the stepmother role. Most notably, she found that stepmothers created a binary opposition in their discourse—that of the biological mother as “wicked” and the stepmother as “good”—in their efforts to challenge this prevailing myth. In a slightly different vein, Craig and Johnson (2010) conducted a content analysis of 62 message sets obtained from an online support group for stepmothers



who have no biological children of their own. Their results revealed positive associations between stepchild investment and interference from the biological mother, as well as between stepchild investment and informational support, esteem support, and stepmother frustration.

Finally, scholars have recently expanded their methods of survey analysis to include advanced statistical models, such as the actor-partner interdependence model (APIMs) and the social relations model (SRM). For instance, Schrodt and Braithwaite's program of research (Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2011; Schrodt, 2010, 2011; Schrodt et al., 2011) on co-parenting relationships in stepfamilies relied on APIMs to control for the interdependence that exists between relational partners as they report on their co-parental communication with each other and with other members of the stepfamily (e.g., the nonresidential parent). Likewise, Schrodt et al. (2008) used an SRM to analyze patterns of generalized and dyadic reciprocity in stepchildren's, parents', and stepparents' reports of everyday talk and relational satisfaction. These are but a few of the ways family communication scholars are expanding their methods of data collection and analysis to provide richer, more nuanced, and thus more valid, knowledge claims about stepfamily interaction.

## **Stepfamily (Mis)Understandings and Future Directions**

Family communication scholars are faced with a tremendous opportunity. Although researchers have made great strides in recent years toward understanding the centrality of communication in stepfamily development, in many ways, the stepfamily remains misunderstood. While stepfamilies share some things in common with first-marriage families, as our review has illustrated, they are qualitatively distinct from them as well. For example, Schrodt and Braithwaite (2010) argued that stepfamilies are uniquely characterized by a functional ambivalence that manifests itself in the roles that family members enact, in the emotions they experience, and in the communication patterns that emerge during the developmental process and beyond. Scholars will do well when they seek to understand stepfamilies in their own right and the discourses that shape and test them. We recognize that all families are discourse dependent, meaning that all families form and negotiate expectations and identities via interaction (Galvin, 2006). Families that depart from cultural norms and are fraught with stereotypes (e.g., stepfamilies), however, are even more dependent on interaction to define and legitimate themselves as family, negotiate relational boundaries,

and manage expectations for those inside and outside of the family, and this is certainly true for stepfamilies.

In addition, researchers need to devote greater attention to understudied relationships within stepfamilies. By and large, most of the research to date has focused primarily on remarried relationships and (step)parent-child relationships within the stepfamily. Much less is known about communication in stepsibling relationships, and we encourage scholars to take up this topic as, especially for stepchildren, these nonvoluntary relationships are complex and potentially fraught with challenges. Scholars also need to pay attention to the influences of interaction beyond the stepfamily household, particularly with extended stepfamily networks. For instance, Soliz (2007) found that grandchildren's reports of parental encouragement, supportive communication, and nonaccommodation positively predicted their sense of a shared family identity with their step-grandparents. Although extended family relationships often go unnoticed by family scholars, they are likely to influence how stepfamily members communicate throughout the developmental process and thus, warrant further attention.

Yet another common source of misunderstanding is the belief that the stepfamily begins with remarriage. To the contrary, cohabiting stepfamilies are on the rise and are increasingly functioning as two-parent families (Manning, 2006). The fluidity of cohabiting families provides an inherent challenge for stepfamily members, as they test the boundaries and bonds that stepfamilies experience and negotiate. Communication scholars can contribute an understanding of the discourses of cohabiting stepfamilies and the influences of these relationships for those inside and outside of the stepfamily boundary. Likewise, scholars can further enhance our understanding of "serial stepfamilies," or those stepfamilies where children have experienced multiple divorces and remarriages that have created a host of current and former stepparent relationships, whether parents marry or not. This, in turn, would encourage researchers to focus more generally on stepfamilies across the life span, as there has been little focus on family communication beyond the stepfamily's formative years.

Finally, we encourage future researchers to continue their empirical and theoretical work on stepfamily strengths. Specifically, there is a need for work that moves toward more sophisticated theoretical explanations of stepfamily interaction and functioning that favor resiliency and coping processes, as there is a need for continued research on communication and behaviors that promote healthy and satisfying stepfamily relationships. We hope to see scholars examine factors that help stepfamily members manage the ambiguities, relational uncertainties, and tensions that undermine healthy stepfamily functioning. Through these types of investigations, family

communication scholars can shed further light upon our (mis)understandings of how stepfamilies communicate, contribute significantly to the interdisciplinary study of stepfamilies, and ultimately enhance the personal and relational well-being of stepfamily members.

## Discussion Questions

1. What is the “deficit comparison approach” that stepfamilies face? What challenges does this view bring to stepfamily researchers and members of stepfamilies themselves?
2. Rather than just focusing on the negative aspects and challenges that stepfamilies face, what do we know about positive communication and functioning in stepfamilies? Why is this important to understand and study?
3. What are some of the main themes and findings from stepfamily researchers looking from the three theoretical perspectives of stepfamily systems, relational dialectics, and symbolic interaction/roles?
4. From the suggestions made by the researchers at the end of the chapter, what do you think are the three most important stepfamily communication issues that need to be studied?