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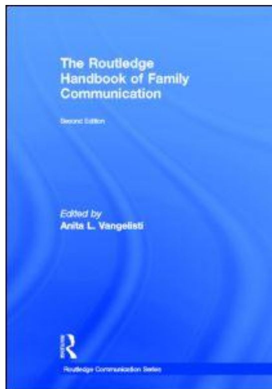

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10
Stepfamily Communication

Dawn O. Braithwaite and Paul Schrodt

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Stepfamilies are one growing family form that represents both opportunities and challenges to the members who live in them, the professionals who work with them, and the scholars who study them. Defined as families in which "at least one of the adults has a child (or children) from a previous relationship" (Ganong & Coleman, 2004, p. 2), stepfamilies represent one of the more difficult family forms to index and study. Earlier estimates suggested that about one-third of U.S. children would spend at least part of their lives as stepchildren (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995), and more recently, Stewart (2007) reported that 15 percent of children under the age of 18 currently live in a married stepfamily. In fact, stepfamily membership is underrepresented in national data sets as stepfamily members' time is often split between households and an increasing number of stepfamilies are cohabiting outside of marriage (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). In addition, children in any given household may be the product of different adult relationships, and thus, many stepfamilies spring from multiple marriages and cohabiting relationships, creating changing and fluid boundaries.

Whatever challenges exist to estimating the incidence of stepfamilies, social scientists agree that they are a prevalent and growing family type that is often misunderstood and understudied. Until recent years, stepfamily scholarship as a whole tended toward what Ganong and Coleman (1994; 2004) labeled a "deficit-comparison" approach, as stepfamilies were compared against intact families, and their differences from the traditional family archetype were most often evaluated negatively. Making an effort to move beyond a deficit approach, one key question researchers have addressed involves the ways stepfamilies are qualitatively similar and distinct from intact, first-marriage families. While scholars have necessarily focused on challenges stepfamilies face, some are also examining communication behaviors that promote growth and resilience in stepfamilies (e.g., Afifi, 2008; Golish, 2003).

The broad interdisciplinary contributions to the study of stepfamilies are a strength of the available empirical and clinical work (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). More recently, family communication scholars have sought to understand the central role of communication in the formation and enactment of stepfamily relationships. While scholars across disciplines study communication variables relevant to stepfamily processes, scholars with a central focus on stepfamily communication are contributing work that centers communication as the primary, constitutive social process by which relationships are formed and enacted (cf. Baxter, 2004). Central to family communication scholarship is the recognition that

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families are discourse dependent, meaning that all families form and negotiate expectations and identities via interaction (Galvin, 2006). From this perspective, all families are discourse dependent. However, families that depart from cultural norms, as is the case with stepfamilies, are even more dependent on interaction to define and legitimate themselves as family and negotiate boundaries and expectations for those inside and outside the family. In essence, those who study family communication enlighten the discourses and processes by which families interact and negotiate relationships and expectations of what it means to be a family.

In this chapter, we review research on stepfamily communication and advance a set of claims that can be made about stepfamily interaction, as well as a set of new directions that future scholars can take to advance the recent proliferation of stepfamily scholarship that has emerged over the last two decades.

Communication and Stepfamily Development

One of the fundamental questions to emerge from the growing body of stepfamily scholarship is whether or not stepfamilies develop and function in qualitatively distinct ways from first-marriage families. As Cherlin argued (Cherlin, 1978; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994), the "incompletely institutionalized" status of stepfamilies fosters uncertain expectations and ambiguity regarding the proper use of kinship terms (Kellas, LeClair-Underberg, & Normand, 2008), the appropriate role of stepparents in children's lives (Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998; Schrodt, 2006a), and the permeability of stepfamily boundaries as family members negotiate the rights, obligations, and communication processes associated with family membership, maintenance, and functioning (Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001; Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2010; Sweeney, 2010). Despite the uncertainties and ambiguities of stepfamily formation, some researchers and family clinicians view stepfamilies as developing along one linear, developmental path, where stepfamily relationships form based on prescriptive, chronological stages (e.g., Papernow, 2008). As Baxter, Braithwaite, and their colleagues have argued (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Braithwaite et al., 2001), however, these developmental stage models are limiting because they oversimplify the developmental process and fail to recognize the tremendous within-group variability that exists among stepfamilies.

Thus, in response to developmental stage models, communication scholars have undertaken efforts to examine the interpersonal behaviors that contribute to different stepfamily developmental pathways and/or stepfamily types. For example, Baxter et al. (1999) used retrospective interviews to identify different types of turning points that stepfamily members experience during the first four years of re-configuration. Their analysis revealed 15 primary types of turning points, ranging from actual physical events such as "changes in household configuration" and "holidays/special events," to relational turning points such as "conflict," "quality time," and "family crisis," among others. These researchers then provided a depiction of changes in "feeling like a family" that included five different trajectories of the first four years of stepfamily development. The *accelerated* trajectory reflected a pattern of quick and sustained movement toward higher levels of feeling like a family. The *declining* trajectory began with a high level of feeling like a family, but quickly declined to very low levels of feeling like a family by the end of the four-year period. The *stagnating* trajectory started and ended with relatively low levels of feeling like a family, whereas the *prolonged* trajectory reflected stepfamilies in which movement toward feeling like a family progressed gradually over a longer period of time. Finally,

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the *high-amplitude turbulent* trajectory reflected stepfamilies that experienced a "roller-coaster" effect, with rapid increases and decreases in levels of feeling like a family (Baxter et al., 1999).

Not only did each of the trajectories, or developmental pathways, differ in terms of the frequency of different types of turnings points, but stepfamily members from each of the five developmental pathways experienced different processes of interacting and forming appropriate roles and boundaries (Braithwaite et al., 2001). Using the same data set, Braithwaite et al. (2001) found that an accelerated trajectory occurred when stepfamily members adopted the conventional, nuclear family model with its prescribed rules and family norms. Stepfamily members who identified with a declining trajectory, however, experienced an initial degree of closeness that quickly diminished due to false expectations of needing to have an "instant family." Stepfamilies that were successful in their ability to feel like a family developed and maintained flexible boundaries between households, whereas stepfamilies that were unable to successfully negotiate their family ties had boundaries that "became extremely rigid and impermeable, demarcating bloodlines and generations" (Braithwaite et al., 2001, p. 241). Overall, Braithwaite et al. (2001) found that families that let their bonds and roles within the family develop naturally, rather than adhering to the myths of "instant family" and "instant love" (Visher & Visher, 1993), were better able to establish close relationships over time.

Recently, Pryor (2008) argued that it may be time to move away from framing stepfamilies as incomplete institutions because the continued use of this "negative phrase" may (a) contribute to stigmatization within the scholarly community, and (b) maintain a scholarly focus on stepfamily deficits rather than on sources of strength and resiliency. Consistent with Pryor's (2008) position, Golish (2003) used family systems theory and research on coping and resiliency to examine the communication strengths that differentiated strong stepfamilies from those struggling with the developmental process. Her results identified seven primary challenges facing stepfamilies regardless of their strength:

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;
7 building solidarity as a family unit.

The communicative tactics used to manage these challenges, however, differed according to the strength of the stepfamily, as strong stepfamilies reported using everyday talk, more 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 more so than stepfamilies that were struggling with the developmental process.

Finally, Schrodt (2006a, 2006b, 2006c) surveyed more than 580 stepchildren from four different states on their perceptions of stepfamily functioning (i.e., dissension, avoidance, involvement, flexibility, and expressiveness) and their relationship with their primary stepparent (in terms of positive regard, parental authority, and affective certainty). Using these dimensions of stepfamily life, he identified five different types of stepfamilies for which significant differences in stepchildren's communication competence and mental health symptoms emerged. First, *bonded* stepfamilies were characterized by low levels of

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dissension and avoidance and relatively high levels of stepfamily involvement, flexibility, and expressiveness. Second, *functional* stepfamilies were characterized by moderately high levels of stepfamily involvement, flexibility, and expressiveness, as well as moderately low levels of dissension and avoidance. What distinguished bonded from functional stepfamilies was the level of parental authority stepchildren granted their stepparent, with stepchildren from bonded stepfamilies granting much more parental authority to the stepparent than those from functional stepfamilies. Whereas *ambivalent* stepfamilies were characterized by slightly above-average levels of dissension and avoidance and slightly below-average levels of involvement, flexibility, and expressiveness, both *evasive* and *conflictual* stepfamilies were characterized by high levels of dissension and avoidance and relatively low levels of involvement and flexibility, with the primary difference between the final two types being levels of stepfamily expressiveness. Importantly, Schrodt (2006c) demonstrated that stepchildren from all five stepfamily types differed in terms of communication competence and mental health symptoms, such that those from bonded and functional stepfamilies were more likely to report higher competence for themselves, their mother, and their primary stepparent, as well as fewer mental health symptoms, than those from ambivalent, evasive, and conflictual stepfamilies.

Collectively, then, Baxter and Braithwaite's research (Baxter et al., 1999; Braithwaite et al., 2001) on stepfamily developmental trajectories, Golish's (2003) research on stepfamily communication strengths, and Schrodt's (2006a, 2006b, 2006c) program of research on stepfamily functioning and types demonstrate the variability that exists within and between different kinds of stepfamilies. As Banker and Gaertner (1998) noted, however, the more stepchildren perceive their stepfamily as one group, the more they perceive their stepfamily as being harmonious, which stresses the importance of developing and managing healthy boundaries during the process of becoming a stepfamily. Two key factors that influence the successful negotiation and maintenance of healthy boundaries within stepfamilies are how family members respond to dialectical tensions and feelings of triangulation, as well as how they negotiate their own and other family members' roles within the stepfamily. Thus, in the next two sections, we review empirical research on these topics before turning our attention to more recent research on coparental communication in stepfamilies.

Stepfamily Discourses and Challenges

Beyond understanding how stepfamilies develop, scholars have focused on how discourse creates, reflects, and changes stepfamily relationships. Summarized broadly, stepfamily communication scholars have centered their work on (a) dialectical approaches, (b) stepfamily rituals, and (c) conflict and/or loyalty binds that emerge when different stepfamily members feel caught in the middle.

First, scholars have employed dialectical approaches to understand the central tensions and challenges confronting stepfamily members in various stepfamily roles. For instance, Cissna, Cox, and Bochner (1990) interviewed remarried couples and identified the dialectic of the marital and parental relationships in the stepfamily. They described challenges remarried couples faced negotiating the dual tasks of communicating to the children the solidarity of the marriage and the authority of the stepparent. Taking the perspective of the stepchildren, Baxter et al. (2004) examined their discourse and identified three contradictions that infused stepchildren's talk about the stepparent–stepchild relationship: a desire for emotional closeness and distance with their stepparent, a desire for the stepparent to be open with them while simultaneously wanting to maintain privacy, and a desire for

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parenting from stepparents while simultaneously resisting their parenting efforts. Braithwaite and Baxter (2006) then examined stepchildren's interaction with their nonresidential parent, and ironically, identified two similar dialectical contradictions. Specifically, the young adult stepchildren in their study recalled wanting parenting and openness from their nonresidential father or mother, yet at the same time, they identified many difficulties in these attempts and equally strong desires for nonparenting and privacy.

Second, scholars have sought to understand stepfamily challenges reflected in stepfamily members' interaction and negotiation of family rituals. Braithwaite, Baxter, and Harper (1998) studied stepfamily members' accounts of interacting and navigating rituals in the first four years of stepfamily life. During this time, some old pre-stepfamily rituals drop out, some are adapted and brought into the stepfamily, and some rituals are created anew in the stepfamily. These scholars concluded that rituals were successful in the new stepfamily to the extent that they spoke to and honored both the old and new families. Most recently, Baxter et al. (2009) interviewed young adult stepchildren about the remarriage rituals of their parent and stepparent. Regardless of parental attempts (or not) to involve them in the wedding, most stepchildren found the marriage ritual empty. The exception was when children perceived that the remarriage ritual reflected the creation of a family and not just the creation of the marital relationship.

In addition to the dialectical tensions and family rituals that underscore the discourse dependency of stepfamilies, a third line of inquiry has centered on stepfamily conflict and the feelings of triangulation that so often plague stepfamily relationships. For example, Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, and Pauk (2001) identified the main sources of conflict as primarily constituting challenges in negotiating internal and external stepfamily boundaries. They described the strategies stepfamily members used to interact and negotiate conflict, and all but one strategy involved communication centrally—going to counseling, holding family meetings, establishing family rules, compromising, parental dispute mediation, and/or withdrawing/leaving.

Likewise, scholars have examined how various stepfamily members experience and interact when they feel "caught in the middle" in the family. For example, Weaver and Coleman (2010) examined the difficulties that mothers face when caught between their children and the stepfather. When conflicts arose, mothers engaged in one of four protective behaviors, all of which were communicative in nature and included gatekeeping, mediating, interpreting, and defending the child(ren)'s actions. Afifi (2003) identified several behaviors that exacerbated young adult stepchildren's feelings of being caught between their divorced parents, including being the recipient of inappropriate disclosures about the divorce, being elevated to the role of peer or confidant, and being asked to mediate and/or act as a messenger. Afifi and Schrodt (2003) found that the effects of divorce on adolescent and young adult children's topic avoidance and relational satisfaction with their parents were mediated by feelings of being caught, which were a function of their parents' demand–withdraw patterns and communication competence. Schrodt and Afifi (2007) then examined interparental conflict behaviors that heightened children's feelings of triangulation, and found that parents' aggression, demand–withdraw patterns, and negative disclosures were positively associated with young adult children's feelings of being caught. Such feelings, in turn, were inversely associated with children's reports of family satisfaction and mental health.

Building on these lines of research, Braithwaite and colleagues (2008) brought stepchildren together in focus groups and identified competing tensions that characterized what it means to be caught in the middle. On one hand, stepchildren did not want to be caught between their parents, and yet at the same time, they wanted to have relevant information

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and to be *centered* in their parents' attention. They found that stepchildren interact in ways to maintain a relationship with both parents and manage information disclosed to them. The stepchildren in their study offered advice to parents on how to communicate in ways that kept children in their desired centered position. Given that feelings of triangulation and many of the other challenges that arise in stepfamilies are associated with particular stepfamily roles or confusion over roles, we review this literature in the section to follow.

Communication and Stepfamily Roles

Perhaps the most important and challenging task associated with becoming a stepfamily involves (re)negotiating family roles. Not surprisingly, the stepparent role has received the lion's share of scholarly attention thus far, due in part to the ambiguities and uncertainties associated with how best to enact such a role in children's lives (Fine et al., 1998; Fine, Ganong, & Coleman, 1997, 1999; Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999; Schrodt, 2006a; Schrodt, Soliz, & Braithwaite, 2008). As Ganong and Coleman (1994, 2004) noted, the stepparent–stepchild relationship is typically considered to be the most challenging and stressful relationship in stepfamilies. Contrary to other personal relationships that are freely chosen by relational partners, step-relationships are often involuntary, leaving very little motivation for stepchildren and stepparents to develop close ties (Ganong et al., 1999). In an effort to address the challenges of creating and sustaining healthy stepparent–stepchild bonds, Fine, Ganong, Coleman, and their colleagues advanced a program of research examining some of the fundamental issues inherent to stepparent relationships (e.g., Fine et al., 1997, 1998, 1999; Ganong et al., 1999). In essence, the basic question concerned whether or not the stepparent should have an active or inactive role in the stepchildren's lives (Fine et al., 1998). For instance, Fine and Kurdek (1994) found that remarried couples expected stepparents to be less active in childrearing than parents, whereas in earlier studies, parents and stepparents reported that stepparents should share equally in childrearing responsibilities (Giles-Sims, 1984). In more recent research, Craig and Johnson (2011) explored the role strain that childless stepmothers face as they desire to have a more active role in their stepchildren's lives, yet face tremendous resistance from biological mothers. Thus, a considerable amount of variability exists in research on stepparent role expectations and enactments.

Some scholars contend that the stepparent should do no more than try to build a friendship with the stepchild(ren), whereas others (e.g., Hetherington, 1999) have found that the long-term benefits of having the stepparent act as a parent outweigh the short-term benefits of having the stepparent simply act as a friend. In their program of research, Fine et al. (1998, 1999) found different perceptions of the stepparent role between adults and children in the stepfamily system. Children were more likely than parents or stepparents to indicate that they preferred the stepparent to function as a friend rather than as a parental figure. Adults were generally more likely to discuss the stepparent role with each other, however, than they were to discuss this role with their stepchildren. This, in turn, led to little consistency in perceptions of parenting behaviors (i.e., warmth and control behaviors) for stepparents among family members, an unfortunate consequence given that consistency in perceptions of the stepparent role was positively associated with stepfamily members' interpersonal adjustment (Fine et al., 1998).

Schrodt (2006a) recently argued that viewing the stepparent relationship in terms of the positive regard that stepparents establish with their stepchildren, the parental authority that stepchildren grant their stepparents (if any), and the degree to which stepparents

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and stepchildren discuss their feelings and their relationships with each other may be more useful in the long run than trying to fit the stepparent into some pre-existing role or label, such as "parent" or "friend." Indeed, liking is considered among scholars and clinicians to be an important factor in stepparent–stepchild bonding (Visher & Visher, 1996). For instance, Ganong et al. (1999) explored the strategies that stepparents used to develop and maintain affinity with their stepchildren, and found three relatively distinct patterns of affinity-seeking and affinity-maintaining strategies among stepparents in their sample: *nonseeking* stepparents, *early affinity-seeking* stepparents, and *continuous affinity-seeking* stepparents. Not surprisingly, stepparents who were genuinely interested in establishing and maintaining close relationships with their stepchildren and continued their efforts well beyond the formation of the stepfamily (i.e., continuous affinity-seeking stepparents) were more likely to have stepchildren who reciprocated affinity-seeking efforts and developed close stepparent–stepchild relationships.

In addition to affinity-seeking behaviors, communication scholars have compared patterns of topic avoidance, everyday talk, and relational satisfaction in stepparent–stepchild relationships with other parent–child relationships. Golish (2000) investigated adolescents' and young adults' use of topic avoidance and its association with relational satisfaction and the parenting style of the stepparent. She found that the more satisfied children were with their mother, father, stepmother, stepfather, and stepfamily overall, the less avoidance they were likely to use in each of these respective relationships. More importantly, Golish reported that stepchildren's avoidance patterns with their stepparents varied as a function of the stepparent's parenting style, with authoritarian stepparenting producing a positive association with avoidance and a negative association with satisfaction, and with both permissiveness and authoritativeness producing an inverse association with avoidance.

Golish and Caughlin (2002) then compared the types of topics avoided across different types of parent–child relationships. In general, adolescents and young adults in their sample engaged in the most topic avoidance with their stepparents (regardless of stepparent sex), followed by their fathers, and then their mothers in descending order of frequency. Their participants also identified several commonly avoided topics, including talking about the other parent/family, deep conversations, and money (e.g., child support payments), as well as frequently reported reasons for avoidance that included self-protection, relationship protection, and conflict avoidance. In support of their findings, Schrodt et al. (2007) compared patterns of everyday talk across parent–child, stepparent–child, and nonresidential parent–child relationships and 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 nonresidential 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. Moreover, Schrodt et al. (2008) provided 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.

The work of these scholars demonstrates the centrality of interpersonal communication to family members' negotiations of the stepparent role. The issue of whether or not the stepparent should function as a "parent," however, is not the only issue facing stepfamily

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members as they (re)negotiate their various roles within the stepfamily system. (Non)residential parents and (step)children must also navigate their own uncertainties and ambivalence during the process of becoming a stepfamily. For instance, Coleman, et al. (2001) found that residential parents (e.g., residential mothers) often wrestle with a "guard and protect" ideology with their new spouse or partner, in which the biological parent errs on the side of guarding and protecting their children's interests in any disputes that may arise with the stepparent. At the same time, residential parents who have experienced divorce may also be managing tremendous tensions and/or resentment toward their former spouses (Graham, 1997, 2003), particularly in stepfamilies where both ex-spouses are involved in the coparenting of children (Braithwaite, McBride, & Schrodt, 2003; Schrodt, Baxter, McBride, Braithwaite, & Fine, 2006).

Nonresidential parents are perhaps even more likely to experience stress and tension as they negotiate access and coordinate visitations with their ex-spouses and their ex-spouses' new partners (i.e., the stepparents). Researchers have demonstrated that remarriage is associated with less frequent coparental interaction (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992), less reported parenting support from the former spouse, and more negative attitudes about the other parent (Christensen & Rettig, 1995), as well as diminished visitation with the children (Wolchik & Fenaughty, 1996). As Braithwaite and Baxter (2006) reported, stepchildren experience tremendous ambivalence and contradictions in relationships with their nonresidential parents. Such tensions and contradictions may constitute a primary source of the distancing that often occurs between nonresidential parents and their children in stepfamilies (cf. Schrodt et al., 2007), as stepchildren attempt to reconcile loyalty divides (cf. Amato & Afifi, 2006).

Moreover, (step)children may also be navigating tremendous role ambiguity in their relationships with other members of the family system, including stepparents, nonresidential parents, and/or stepsiblings. Baxter et al. (2004) discovered, for example, that stepchildren struggle with the tension of wanting both a one-parent authority system in which the residential parent alone enacts discipline in the family, and a two-parent authority system in which the parent and stepparent enact discipline as a couple. Speer and Trees (2007) recently examined stepchildren's autonomy and connection-seeking behaviors with their stepparents, and found that perceptions of stepparents' warmth behaviors were positively associated with stepchildren's role clarity, which in turn was positively associated with connection-seeking behaviors and family satisfaction.

Although scholars have tended to focus on members within the stepfamily household and nonresidential parents, extended family relationships are largely understudied in the stepfamily literature. Children from divorced families often have little say in the amount of contact and the relationships they have with their extended family members, yet many of these important relationships may be diminished or threatened altogether during the development of a new stepfamily (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). For instance, researchers have identified the important role grandparents may play in children's adjustment post-divorce, such that grandparents may be uncertain how to best enact this role and may experience barriers to interacting with their grandchildren, especially when children do not reside with a parent (Soliz 2008). DiVerniero (2011) interviewed stepchildren about interaction with their nonresidential parent's family members. She focused on how the children and extended family accommodated their communication toward one another and discovered that stepchildren and their extended family members employed discourse management strategies, particularly topic avoidance, as they sought to converge or maintain their relationship with the nonresidential family. For

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example, stepchildren often avoided talking about positive interactions with a stepparent that they perceived would be uncomfortable for their grandparents or other extended family members. Stepchildren also wanted to avoid opening the door for their relatives to express negative information that would make the child feel uncomfortable.

One theme springing from the literature is that in-group/out-group distinctions are inherent to the process of (re)negotiating family roles within stepfamily systems. In addition, questions regarding family membership often revolve around issues of physical and psychological ambiguity in stepfamilies. Drawing on national survey data, Stewart (2005) found that boundary ambiguity (a) is much more prevalent in stepfamilies than in two-parent families, (b) is more prevalent in certain types of stepfamilies, such as those with nonresident stepchildren and/or those that are more structurally complex (i.e., both adults bringing children from previous unions as opposed to only one adult), and (c) is negatively associated with the quality of the couple's relationship and the stability of the union, but only from the perspectives of wives or female partners. Further, Stewart found greater role ambiguity among nonresidential parents than among residential parents, and more recently, she identified a litany of problems that can occur when stepfamily members disagree about what type of stepfamily they belong to (e.g., a traditional family or not) (Stewart, 2007). Given that boundary ambiguity has been linked to both family conflict and adjustment problems for stepfamily members (Gosselin & David, 2007), Stewart's findings call particular attention to role performance in stepfamilies, including the various ways in which ex-spouses and their new partners negotiate their coparenting relationships post-divorce. Thus, in the next section of this chapter, we review recent research on coparental communication in stepfamilies before concluding our chapter with new directions for researchers.

Coparental Communication in Stepfamilies

Perhaps no other family experience is simultaneously more rewarding and more challenging than coparenting children (see Beaton, Doherty, & Wenger, Chapter 14, this volume). A coparenting relationship exists "when at least two individuals are expected by mutual agreement or societal norms to have conjoint responsibility for a particular child's well-being" (Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004, p. 166). Coparental communication, in turn, refers not to the individual attempts of a parent to guide and direct the behaviors and activities of his or her child, but to the interaction patterns that emerge as one coparent supports and/or undermines the parenting attempts of his or her partner. Adamsons and Pasley (2006) argued that coparental communication should be conceptualized and studied as distinct from other interparental interactions because of the potential unique effects that coparenting may have on family member outcomes. For example, researchers have demonstrated that coparenting in first-marriage families is more predictive of parents' and children's adjustment than is general marital quality, that coparenting accounts for variance in parenting and child outcomes after controlling for individual parent characteristics, and that coparenting is more predictive of marital quality than marital quality is of coparenting (Feinburg, Kan, & Hetherington, 2007; Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Frosch, & McHale, 2004).

Although the coparenting relationship is central to family functioning, to date, coparenting relationships within stepfamily households have received scant attention. In the two most recent decades in review on stepfamilies, for example, Coleman et al. (2000) and Sweeney (2010) summarized empirical research on remarriage and stepfamily relationships from more than 900 publications over the last 20 years. Ironically, research

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on coparental communication in stepfamilies was missing altogether from both reviews. In an effort to address this void in the stepfamily literature, Braithwaite, Schrodt, and their colleagues (Braithwaite et al., 2003; Schrodt et al., 2006) examined communication patterns among coparents in stepfamilies (including residential parents, stepparents, and nonresidential parents) using time diaries and in-depth interviews. In their first report using diary data, Braithwaite et al. (2003) found that the coparents in their sample had a moderate level of interaction that was characterized as being very "business-like" and focused primarily on the children. In their second report using follow-up interviews, Schrodt et al. (2006) investigated the various ways in which parents and stepparents communicated about the meaning of the divorce decree within their coparenting 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 coparenting actions of nonresidential parents.

Extending these earlier efforts, Schrodt and Braithwaite (2011; Schrodt, 2010, 2011; Schrodt, Miller, & Braithwaite, 2011) then conducted a series of studies exploring the associations among supportive and (non)antagonistic coparental communication, relational satisfaction, and mental health among various coparenting dyads within the stepfamily. In their first report, Schrodt and Braithwaite (2011) found that residential parents' and stepparents' coparental communication quality (i.e., supportive and nonhostile) positively predicted their own (but not their partners') satisfaction and mental health. Couples' relational satisfaction, in turn, mediated the effects of parents' and stepparents' supportive coparental communication on their own mental health symptoms. In fact, after controlling for relational satisfaction, a suppressor effect emerged whereby parents' coparental communication with their partners produced an *inverse*, partner effect on stepparents' mental health. As Schrodt and Braithwaite (2011) reasoned, stepparents may experience stress and ambivalence as they are called upon to help raise their spouse's offspring. In one sense, being called upon to act as a parent may help a residential stepparent feel more like a member of the family, and 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.

Not only must residential parents and stepparents navigate the challenges associated with coparenting children, but remarriages occur and are maintained under the watchful eyes of a third party who holds a vested interest in the quality and stability of the stepfamily system, namely the former spouse (or partner) (Ganong, Coleman, & Hans, 2006). Given this finding, Schrodt (2010) examined couples' coparental communication with nonresidential parents as a predictor of residential parents' and stepparents' satisfaction and mental health. Specifically, his results revealed that stepparents' coparental communication (i.e., supportive and cooperative) with nonresidential parents positively predicted their satisfaction with their current partners (i.e., with residential parents). Likewise, stepparents' coparental 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, Schrodt's (2011) results highlight the stress and ambivalence that residential parents may experience as they manage the tensions associated with having their current relational partner coparent with their ex-spouse.

Having discovered the ambivalence that both residential parents and stepparents feel as they coparent together, as well as with the nonresidential parent, Schrodt et al. (2011) tested the effects of supportive and antagonistic coparental communication on ex-spouses' relational satisfaction in stepfamilies. Consistent with their first two reports, Schrodt et al.

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(2011) found that ex-spouses' supportive and antagonistic coparental communication predicted their own (but not their ex-spouse's) relational satisfaction. More importantly, nonresidential parents' supportive and antagonistic coparental 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 coparenting relationships in stepfamilies, as supportive coparental 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.

In their recent review of stepfamily research, Schrodt and Braithwaite (2010) argued that one of the defining characteristics that distinguishes stepfamilies from other family forms is the (dys)functional ambivalence inherent to stepfamily life. Although ambivalence is likely to characterize (to greater or lesser degrees) each of the dyadic relationships that exist within stepfamily systems, perhaps no relationship is filled with greater ambivalence than the relationship that emerges between a residential stepparent and his or her partner's ex-spouse (i.e., the nonresidential parent). Not only are these two adults faced with the awkwardness and tension associated with having (or having had) a common relational partner, but most residential stepparents and nonresidential parents are brought together (if at all) by their common (and at times, competing) interests in coparenting children. To further explore these issues, Schrodt (2011) investigated coparental communication and relational satisfaction in residential stepparent/nonresidential parent dyads. He found that although some stepparents and nonresidential parents may avoid contact altogether when it comes to the children, those who do communicate with each other in ways that are understanding and supportive of each other's parenting attempts are likely to enhance the satisfaction that both adults feel in their coparenting relationship. More importantly, Schrodt discovered that nonresidential parents' coparental 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.

Taken together, Schrodt and Braithwaite's (2011; Schrodt, 2010, 2011; Schrodt et al., 2011) investigations of coparental communication, relational satisfaction, and mental health in stepfamilies illustrate the importance of supportive and cooperative coparental communication to the relational and personal well-being of adult family members, as well as the interdependence that exists among various adult dyads within the stepfamily system. Margolin, Gordis, and John (2001) proposed that coparental communication may act as a risk mechanism in family systems, mediating the relationships between marital quality and parenting, and children's adjustment. Thus, examining the degree to which coparental communication mediates the effects of witnessing interparental conflict on children's emotional and mental well-being represents one of several future directions researchers might take as they seek to further our understanding of communication and stepfamily functioning.

Conclusions and Future Directions

As evidenced by this review, scholars have made great strides in recent years toward understanding the centrality of communication in stepfamily development, in navigating dialectical tensions and loyalty binds, enacting new roles, and developing healthy and

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satisfying coparental relationships. While stepfamilies share some commonalities with first-marriage families, they are qualitatively distinct from them as well. For example, Schrodt and Braithwaite (2010) identified three sources of functional ambivalence that demonstrate their uniqueness, including role ambivalence, emotional ambivalence, and communicative ambivalence. Scholars will do well when they seek to understand stepfamilies in their own right and the discourses that shape and test them. Researchers will continue to confront the complexities of studying stepfamilies and, in so doing, develop more nuanced understandings of stepfamily communication and increasingly sophisticated models of interaction that account for multiple family members' perspectives.

Scholars also need to continue to devote more attention to understudied relationships in stepfamilies. For example, stepsibling relationships and extended stepfamily networks warrant further investigation, as do cohabiting stepfamilies given that these families 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 the stepfamily boundary. In addition, scholars need to pay attention to stepfamilies across the lifespan (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), as there has been little focus on family communication beyond the stepfamily's formative years or stepfamily experiences during childhood.

There will be continued debate regarding the role of the stepparent. Some scholars eschew the idea that the stepparent should enact a parental role in the stepchild's life, whereas others (e.g., Hetherington, 1999) argue that the long-term benefits of having the stepparent act as a parent may outweigh any short-term difficulties associated with such a move. At a minimum, scholars have reached a general consensus that the stepparent role represents one of the key features (if not the key feature) distinguishing the stepfamily from other family forms, and we advocate research that continues to examine how stepparents interact and navigate the stepfamily system.

While stepfamily research has long been the purview of social scientists, a number of scholars interested in family communication are adopting a critical turn in their work. For example, Baxter (2010) has taken relational dialectical theory in a critical direction, arguing for a focus on discourses that are centered and those that are marginalized. This represents a potentially fruitful research direction for stepfamily communication scholars, especially those seeking to understand the experiences of stepchildren whose agency is most often limited as their parents separate, divorce, and enter into stepfamily relationships, bringing children along, often reluctantly, into new territory.

Finally, we encourage researchers to increase efforts focused on understanding stepfamily strengths, moving toward more sophisticated theoretical explanations of stepfamily interaction and functioning that favor resiliency and coping processes. Family communication scholars are well positioned to enhance our understanding of stepfamilies as they interact to form, legitimize, and enact stepfamily life.

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