STEPFAMILY WORLDS: ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDIES OF
STEPFATHER-STEPSON COMMUNICATION

A Dissertation in
Communication Arts and Sciences
by
Jonathan L. Pettigrew

© 2011 Jonathan L. Pettigrew

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

August 2011
The dissertation of Jonathan L. Pettigrew was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Michelle Miller-Day  
Associate Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences  
Dissertation Adviser  
Chair of Committee

Michael L. Hecht  
Distinguished Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences and Crime, Law, and Justice

Jon F. Nussbaum  
Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences and Human Development and Family Studies

J. Doug Coatsworth  
Associate Professor of Human Development and Family Studies

Thomas Benson  
Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Rhetoric  
Head of the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School.
Abstract

This dissertation contributes a descriptive base to the study of stepfamily systems in general and stepfather-stepson interaction in particular by describing six ethnographic case studies of how stepfathers and stepsons communicate social support. Research on stepfamilies consistently demonstrates that some children in stepfamily households are at risk for academic, psychological, and behavioral problems, and that supportive stepfather-stepchild relationships help counteract these negative outcomes for youth. Yet, little is known about how support is communicated and perceived in stepfather-stepchild relationships. Based on a relational view of communication, this dissertation details how social support is communicated and perceived by stepfathers and their stepsons within purposefully selected stepfamilies.

Six rural, middle-class, Caucasian stepfamilies including a stepfather, a 10-14 year old stepson, and his biological mother were recruited from social groups in central Pennsylvania to be part of an in-depth investigation into the communication of support in stepfather-stepson pairs. Data were collected across a minimum of four weeks with each family through qualitative field work involving in-depth interviews with stepfathers, youth, and mothers; eight, two-hour observational visits of family interaction in naturalistic settings; and, online questionnaires completed by stepfathers, youth, and mothers.

Analysis involved within case and cross case analyses of interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and questionnaire responses. Using a case study approach, within case analysis provided rich detail about individual and family level factors that resulted in a
description of six distinct stepfather-stepson relational cultures of support embedded within stepfamily systems. Cross case analysis identified ways emotional, informational, and instrumental support was communicated between stepfather-stepson pairs and revealed six cross case patterns of supportive communication. Distinct from other families, stepfather-stepson support is influenced by interactions with nonresident households, such as stepfathers’ biological children, visitation schedules between households, and comparisons between stepfathers and biological fathers. Findings suggest a model where stepfathers’ motivation, experience, and social capital are communicated to stepsons through micro support messages that are encoded and decoded in light of the relational and family culture of support. Stepsons receive messages, sum them across interactions, and compare them against nonresident households in order to define and modify their perception of the relationship.
Table of Contents

LIST OF TABLES ............................................................................................................. ix
LIST OF FIGURES .......................................................................................................... x
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................................................................. xi

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE ......................................................... 1
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM.................................................................................... 5
PURPOSE OF THE STUDY ............................................................................................... 6
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK .......................................................................................... 6
RESEARCH AIMS ............................................................................................................ 9

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE ..................................................................... 10
FATHERING, STEPFATHERING, AND COMMUNICATION .......................................... 10
Stepfathering as a relational act. ................................................................................. 10
Stepfathering requires involvement. ............................................................................ 11
Stepfathering as distinct from fathering. .................................................................. 13
Conclusions about stepfathering. ................................................................................ 15
SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION ................................................................................. 17
Defining social support. ............................................................................................... 17
Important aspects of support. ..................................................................................... 18
Parent-child support .................................................................................................... 20
Conclusions about support. .......................................................................................... 22
CONCLUSIONS FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW .................................................. 23

CHAPTER 3: METHODS ............................................................................................. 24
QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY ................................................................................ 25
SAMPLING .................................................................................................................... 26
RECRUITMENT .............................................................................................................. 28
DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES .......................................................................... 33
Family orientation. ....................................................................................................... 35
In-depth interviews. ...................................................................................................... 36
Observational research. ............................................................................................... 38
Self-report measures. ................................................................................................... 41
DATA ANALYSIS ......................................................................................................... 45
Field analysis. ............................................................................................................... 46
Armchair analysis ....................................................................................................... 47
Reflections on analysis. ............................................................................................... 54
SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS ...................................................................................... 55

CHAPTER 4: CULTURES OF SUPPORT .................................................................. 60
THE KING FAMILY ....................................................................................................... 62
THE JACOBS FAMILY ................................................................. 77

DARREN’S ROLE AS STEPFATHER ........................................... 78
  Early experiences ............................................................. 79
  Employment .................................................................. 82

MASCULINITY VERSUS MOMMA’S BOY ................................. 84
  Darren’s perspective ....................................................... 85
  Karen’s perspective ....................................................... 86
  Brad’s perspective ......................................................... 87
  Reconciling viewpoints .................................................. 88

ATTITUDES IN ACTION ........................................................... 90
  Dog incident .................................................................. 92
  Video games .................................................................. 94
  Hunting .......................................................................... 99

CULTURE OF SUPPORT .......................................................... 102

THE FISHER FAMILY ............................................................... 103

ROLE OF STEPFATHER ........................................................... 103
  Father again .................................................................. 103
  Interactions with Sam ................................................... 106
  Interactions with Alan ................................................... 109

RELATIONAL AND FAMILY ACTIONS ................................... 112
  Bowling ........................................................................ 113

CULTURE OF SUPPORT .......................................................... 117

THE WELIVER FAMILY ............................................................. 118

ROLE OF THE STEPFATHER .................................................... 119
  What is a stepfather? ..................................................... 119
  Early tinkering experiences ........................................... 122
  Work schedule ............................................................. 123
  Discipline ..................................................................... 124

ACTIONS ........................................................................... 125
  Woodworking ............................................................... 125
Learning about Evan. ........................................................................................................ 130
CULTURE OF SUPPORT ........................................................................................... 131

THE HOLLAND FAMILY ......................................................................................... 132
BUCK’S ROLE ........................................................................................................... 133
As stepfather. ............................................................................................................. 133
As nonresident father .............................................................................................. 135
Caroline’s sickness. .................................................................................................. 137
ACTIONS .................................................................................................................. 140
Church involvement. ................................................................................................ 140
Helping with homework. ......................................................................................... 141
CULTURE OF SUPPORT ....................................................................................... 143

THE JONES FAMILY ............................................................................................... 144
STEPFATHER ROLE ................................................................................................ 145
Relationship conductor ............................................................................................. 146
Jake’s nonresident father .......................................................................................... 149
Daniel’s issues ........................................................................................................... 151
CONNECTING RITUALS .......................................................................................... 153
High-low. .................................................................................................................. 154
Movie Night. .............................................................................................................. 156
Gaming. ................................................................................................................... 157
CULTURE OF SUPPORT ....................................................................................... 159

EXAMINING CULTURES OF SUPPORT ................................................................. 160

CHAPTER 5: CROSS CASE ANALYSIS OF SUPPORT .............................................. 164
EMOTIONAL SUPPORT ............................................................................................ 164
Encouraging and saying “I love you.” .................................................................. 164
Showing support without words. ......................................................................... 167
Spending time together. ......................................................................................... 169
Claiming. ................................................................................................................ 173
INFORMATIONAL SUPPORT ................................................................................... 180
Transferring knowledge. ....................................................................................... 181
Moral guidance or advice ....................................................................................... 183
INSTRUMENTAL SUPPORT ..................................................................................... 186
Providing for needs. ............................................................................................... 187
Providing items youth wanted. ............................................................................... 188
Facilitating enjoyable activities. ............................................................................. 190
MICRO SUPPORT MESSAGES ............................................................................. 195
CONCLUSION .......................................................................................................... 200
CHAPTER 6: MODEL OF SUPPORT ................................................................. 202
CROSS CASE PATTERNS ........................................................................ 203
  Default type of support ................................................................ 203
  Motivation ......................................................................................... 208
  Fathering experience ..................................................................... 211
  Social capital ..................................................................................... 212
  Perceived need ............................................................................... 213
  Nonresident experiences ................................................................. 214
  Cross case patterns summary ......................................................... 224
CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF SUPPORTIVE STEPFATHER-STEPSON COMMUNICATION................................................................. 225
  Interactive episode ......................................................................... 228
  Elements of figure 6.2 .................................................................... 229
  Elements of figure 6.3 .................................................................... 231
  Developmental processes ................................................................. 238
STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE MODEL ......................................................... 240
CHAPTER 7: CONTRIBUTIONS .................................................................. 243
INTERPRETATIVE ISSUES ....................................................................... 244
  Sample of stepfathers .................................................................... 244
  Objectivity/Confirmability ................................................................. 247
  Validity/Trustworthiness .................................................................. 249
  Reliability/Dependability ................................................................. 251
  Generalizability/Transferability ....................................................... 252
  Summary ........................................................................................... 255
IMPLICATIONS ...................................................................................... 256
  Relational view of communication ................................................ 256
  Youth behaviors .............................................................................. 258
FUTURE DIRECTIONS ........................................................................... 260
SUMMARY .............................................................................................. 262
APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT MATERIAL ............................................... 264
APPENDIX B: DATA COLLECTION LOG ............................................... 267
APPENDIX C: SAMPLE INFORMED CONSENT ..................................... 270
APPENDIX D: DATA COLLECTION GUIDES ......................................... 275
REFERENCES .......................................................................................... 303
List of Tables

Table 3.1 Sample names, ages, and household membership ..................................................58
Table 3.2 Family History, Duration and Socioeconomic Status ...............................................58
Table 3.3 Expressiveness and Conformity Scores .................................................................59
Table 3.4 Parent-Child Supportive Relationships ..............................................................59
Table 6.1 Stepfathering Behaviors and Stepson Evaluations by Family Type ...................206
List of Figures

Figure 4.1. Fisher family bowling outing ................................................................. 114
Figure 4.2. Evan’s stool at the workbench ............................................................... 126
Figure 4.3. Karl and Evan drilling birdhouse together ........................................... 127
Figure 4.4. Karl accepting Evan’s influence to drill bigger hold in birdhouse .......... 129
Figure 4.5. Mitchel and Buck’s model cannon ....................................................... 142
Figure 5.1. Jones family snowman ...................................................................... 171
Figure 5.2. King family jack-o-lantern carving. ..................................................... 172
Figure 5.3. Fisher family Christmas present for Steve ........................................... 188
Figure 5.4. Jones family decorations for Jake’s birthday party ............................... 192
Figure 5.5. Jones family sofa lined with Nurf guns loaded for “epic” battle .......... 193
Figure 6.1. Holland family Cookie Fest tradition ................................................... 212
Figure 6.2. Conceptual model of supportive stepfather-stepson communication ....... 226
Figure 6.3. Process of supportive stepfather-stepson communication .................... 227
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank those who have helped with the conception, development, and production of this dissertation. Thanks to Professor Michelle Miller-Day I settled on a topic early in my doctoral studies. Having a topic and conceiving a dissertation, however, were two distinct events. The former was simply a combination of my desire to study family and the need to study support in stepfamilies. The latter was the synthesis of three separate activities, which were timed impeccably. First, I am grateful to Professor Gail G. Whitchurch for exposing me to some of the classic readings in family studies and communication, particularly the 1959 book *Family Worlds* by Hess and Handel. Second, thanks again to Michelle Miller-Day who required a book review as part of her survey of qualitative methods. Finally, I am grateful to Professor Michael Hecht who involved me in the Drug Resistance Strategy project and allowed me to participate in careful, well planned research moving from formative qualitative inquiry to curriculum design to intervention implementation. These separate events culminated in the conception of this study.

In the development of my dissertation, I also am grateful to a variety of professors who have instructed me in theories and ideas related to the human behavior, social relationships, and the family. Chief among these, I thank Professor Alan Booth whose own research contributions and dedication to students served as a stellar role model; Professor Jon Nussbaum, who faithfully and reliably kept the developmental nature of human experience before me; Professor Doug Coatsworth who introduced me to a number of family interventions and prevention science; Professor Denise Solomon who first asked me to spend three hours in free writing about different theoretical perspectives
on human relationships; Professor Michael Hecht who modeled collaboration and support; and, Professor Michelle Miller-Day who pressed me to substantiate any and every claim as well as distinguish between fact and inference.

I also thank three others in particular who have aided the production of the dissertation: David and Barbara Paden who opened their sanctuary home as a peaceful workspace; my brother, David Pettigrew, for reading, editing, and commenting on early instantiations of my “analysis;” my wife, Breanne Pettigrew, who motivated me to achieve, encouraged me to write, reminded me the importance of family, and modeled the warmth, dedication, patience, practicality, and beauty of supportive communication.

Lastly, ultimately, I thank my God – Father, Son, and Spirit Divine – who called me to this task and has enabled its completion. Soli Deo Gloria.

Jonathan Pettigrew

State College, Pennsylvania

March 2011
Chapter 1: Introduction and Rationale

Research on stepfamilies consistently demonstrates that some children in stepfamily households are at a risk for academic, psychological, and behavioral problems due to the stepfamily form (Amato, 2001; Bray & Easling, 2005; Jeynes, 2006). Children in stepfamilies report significantly less support and less discipline from stepfathers as well as less family cohesion than children from intact biological families (Amato, 1987). Compared to children raised by their biological parents, children in stepfamilies spend less time with and have less access to a father, even when combining time with and access to both non-resident fathers and stepfathers (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003).

Research suggests that some stepchildren, as adolescents, persistently exhibit negativity toward stepparents (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992), become sexually involved at a younger age, tend to enter cohabitating relationships more, have an elevated risk for use and abuse of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs (Hoffmann & Johnson, 1998; Jenkins & Zunguze, 1998), and leave their parents earlier than their counterparts reared in intact biological families (Amato & Booth, 1997; White, 1994).

Although stepfamily living constitutes a risk for some youth (Ganong & Colman, 2004), risk is not a simple function of family structure. For example, a study which compared stepfamily and single parent families with continuously married, biological families classified as high, medium, or low conflict found that medium and high conflict intact families often produced similar risks for adolescents as did step and single parent families (Musick & Meier, 2009). This study suggests that the frequency and severity of conflict witnessed and experienced by youth may be just as important as family structure.

Another study tested differences in childhood internalizing, externalizing, and problem
behaviors across five family structures, including biologically intact families, mother-stepfather families, father-stepmother families, adoptive families, and single mother families (Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001). Lansford, Caballo, Abbey and Stewart (2001) concluded that disagreements between spouses and parent-child disagreements accounted for any variability in outcomes among family structures, supporting the claim that family processes were more predictive of problem behaviors than family structure. Another study examined adolescent substance use and found that parental monitoring and peer group composition completely accounted for drug use, controlling for family structure (i.e., two-parent, mother-only, father-only, and mother-stepfather family structures) (Wang, Simons-Morton, Farhat, & Luk, 2009). These studies imply that something other than family structure contributes to adolescent risk in stepfamily systems.

A growing body of research suggests that family processes account for the effects of family structure on most childhood outcomes (Adamsons, O’Brien, & Pasley, 2007; Hofferth, 2006; Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001). However, in a recent review of stepfamily literature, Colman, Ganong, and Fine (2005) commented that little is known about communication dynamics in stepfamilies because it has seldom been the focus of investigations. Research that has investigated stepfamily communication demonstrates that various family communication processes function differently in stepfamily systems than in biological family systems (Amato & Afifi, 2003; Golish & Caughlin, 2002; S. Vuchinich, R. Vuchinich, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1991). For example, in one study stepparents reported showing less affection to their stepchildren and participating in fewer activities with them than biological parents (Thomson,
McLanahan, & Braun-Curtin, 1992). Other processes such as managing boundaries and uncertainty (Afifi, 2003; Afifi & Schrodt, 2003), co-parenting relationships within (and across) households (Braithwaite, McBride, & Schrodt, 2003), perceptions of (step)parents (Amato & Afifi, 2003), conversation topics (Golish & Caughlin, 2002; Vuchinich et al., 1991), stepfamily development (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999), and even the terminology used to address parents (Kellas, LeClair-Underberg, & Normand, 2008) also function uniquely in stepfamily systems. Despite differences in certain elements of family functioning, researchers tend to infer that support in stepfamily systems functions the same as in other family systems (see Pasley, Rhoden, E. Visher, & J. Visher, 1996).

Several recent reviews (Bray & Easling, 2005; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Pasley & Moorfield, 2004) have called for additional research into interactional patterns among stepfamily members. These reviews argue that to broaden understanding of stepfamily experience, researchers must identify what constitutes healthy as well as maladaptive stepparenting behaviors.

One family process that may be particularly important to investigate, in terms of stepchild outcomes, is communicating support in the stepfather-stepchild relationship. Researchers have found that developing supportive stepfather-stepchild relationships helps counteract negative psychological and behavioral problems in youth who live in stepfamily households (King, 2006; White & Gilbreth, 2001). Although positive, supportive relationships serve a positive function for adolescents from any family structure (Moore & Zaff, 2002), stepfamily research provides clear evidence that stepfamilies function differently from other family structures (e.g., Golish, 2003; Thomson, McLanahan, & Braun-Curtin, 1992; Vuchinich et al., 1991), hence it is
reasonable to suggest that support may be enacted differently in stepfamily relationships than in family relationships from other family structures. Research provides evidence that “supportive relationships” serve to buffer youth from many of the risks associated with growing up in a stepfamily system (King, 2006; White & Gilbreth, 2001), but little is known about what constitutes a “supportive relationship” in stepfamilies or how support is enacted in stepfather-stepchild relationships. For example, White and Gilbreth used only a six item scale assessing how frequently the stepfather praises or criticizes the child, the likelihood the child would talk to the stepparent if he or she felt depressed or was making a major decision, how much the child admires the stepfather, and a global evaluation of their relationship. King provided a profile of predictive characteristics for relational quality, but failed to explain how support may actually be perceived and enacted by stepfathers and stepchildren. That is, although this research finds evidence that support matters in stepfamily relationships, the nature of the supportive interaction in stepfamily relationships is unclear.

Seeking to clarify how stepparents develop relationships with their stepchildren, Ganong, Coleman, Fine, and Martin (1999) focused on affinity-seeking behaviors in stepfamilies. They utilized retrospective, semi-structured interviews with all members of seventeen stepfamily households. Their interview analysis considered ways stepparents sought to develop close relationships with their stepchildren. The researchers presented a typology of stepparent relational development in terms of affinity seeking behaviors, and suggested various strategies stepparents might utilize to seek stepchild affinity. This study added valuable insight into the process of developing supportive stepparent-child relationships and into stepchildren’s perceptions of various stepparent behaviors. While
extremely useful in terms of understanding stepparent-stepchild development and communication strategies, such investigations are rare.

In order to limit the scope of this study, rather than look at any stepfather-stepchild relationship, I focus on stepfathers and their stepsons. The rationale for this specificity is two-fold. First, females in stepfamilies may be particularly troubled by the entrance of a stepfather into the family (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; White, 1994). In a study of stepfather-stepchild interactions, girls exhibited more negativity and less positivity toward stepfathers compared with boys (Clingempeel, Ievoli, & Brand, 1984). Females living in stepfamilies also experienced an earlier menarche than girls living with their biological fathers in one study, a biological phenomenon which has been associated with a variety of social problems (Ellis, McFadyen-Ketchum, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1999). Second, developing a relationship with a stepfather may be particularly important for stepsons because stepfathers provide gendered role model (Schmeeckle, 2007). Hetherington and Jodl (1994) report that “parenting by … parents of the same sex as the child [were] more strongly associated with child adjustment than was parenting by … parent of the opposite sex” (p. 73). In sum, male adolescents are more benefited from stepfather involvement than female adolescents (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan 1999). Thus, learning how stepfathers support stepsons may provide the most useful information for modifying negative outcomes associated with stepfamily living because stepsons seem to be more susceptible to stepfathers’ influence than are stepdaughters.

**Statement of the Problem**

Although research suggests that family processes account for differences in youth outcomes across various family structures and that developing supportive stepfather-
stepchild relationships can help counteract stepchild risk, little is known about how support is communicated between stepfathers and stepchildren in stepfamily households.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate the communication of support in stepfather-stepson relationships. This study extends current thinking of what constitutes supportive stepfather-stepchild relationships and describes stepfamily experience. To obtain information that is ecologically valid (i.e., maintain a high degree of descriptive validity; Maxwell, 2002), the methods, materials, and setting of a research study should approximate the real-life situation under investigation (see Brewer, 2000). Hence, this study employed observational research in naturalistic settings along with in-depth interviews and self-report measures with purposively selected stepfathers and stepsons.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study is a relational view of communication (Duck, 1995: Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996). I summarize a relational view of communication perspective with three main propositions. First, mundane, everyday encounters make space for a relationship to exist. Interactions amass relational substance which can then outweigh countervailing forces that would dissolve the relationship. For example, without everyday or mundane interaction, there potentially would be no relationship between stepfathers and stepchildren. They would be strangers to one another. When stepfathers greet or ignore their stepchildren every morning or ask how their day went in the evening, they are creating a space for the relationship to develop through interaction.
The second proposition is that relationships are indeterminate in the sense that their form or even their continuation is not prescribed. Relationships may end or they may develop into something unexpected. At one point, every husband and wife were strangers to one another. It is through their interaction – meeting one another, spending time together (e.g., dating), deciding to marry – that their relationship is created. After marriage, relationships continue to change. Many marriages experience divorce which alters the structure of the relationship. Further explaining the second proposition, social and biological forces may shape relationships, but do not predetermine them. For example, there is a social expectation that mothers in the United States love, protect, and provide for their children and mothering behaviors are biologically reinforced (Bornstine, 2006; Fleming, 2009). Despite these social and biological forces, however, neither mothering behavior nor mother-child relationships are predetermined. There is no single pathway that mother-child relationships travel and no single form they take. A mother may abandon her son at birth, for example, and 20 years later initiate a relationship. Relationships are constituted through interaction and not biology (Duck, 1995).

The third proposition of a relational view of communication is that relationships vary in terms of the amount and types of interaction involved. For example, Vuchinich and colleagues (1991) examined the actual talk which occurred over dinner between family members in step and intact families. Their findings suggest that fathers are more comfortable disciplining, disagreeing, training, teaching, and correcting in biological families than in stepfamilies. Stepchildren seemed withdrawn from stepfathers and vice versa. Golish and Caughlin (2002) looked at what topics were avoided in step and biological relationships. Their findings suggest that mothers hold a special place in terms
of communication – not many topics were avoided between children and mothers. Biological fathers, however, were only slightly different from either stepmothers or stepfathers. For various reasons, there are norms for how stepchildren communicate with their stepfathers. Different relationships vary in terms of the amount and types of interactions involved.

This study is guided by a relational view of communication. I contend that stepfather-stepchild relationships are constituted by everyday communication, are indeterminate, and are unique from other types of relationships. Interactions occurring between stepfathers and stepchildren substantiate, form, and modify the stepfather-stepson relationship. Supportive stepfather-stepchild communication can alter the relationship between stepfathers and their stepchildren, even changing childhood outcomes (King, 2006; White & Gilbreth, 2002). To the degree that members of a family system are interdependent, changes in stepfather-stepchild relationships will necessarily impact other elements of the family system (Bertalanffy, 1969; Whitchurch & Constintine, 2000), potentially altering family processes (Dishion & Snyder, 2004; Olson & Gorall, 2003). Empirical studies support this theoretical claim showing, for example, that considering multiple developmental processes simultaneously as well as considering the nature of those processes (e.g., Hollenstein, Granic, Stoolmiller & Snyder, 2004) allowed a more robust understanding of how early experiences predict behaviors occurring years later (Lewis, 2004). So too, changes in the stepfather-stepchild relationship contribute to patterns of development and communication which influence family processes. Therefore, changing stepfather-stepchild interactions potentially modifies stepchild outcomes.
Research Aims

Based on the need for more information about the communication of support in stepfather-stepson relationships, my dissertation is guided by two aims. First, I seek to describe what is considered a supportive stepfather-stepchild relationship from the perspective of stepfamily members. Second, I aim to discover how support is communicated in stepfather-stepson relationships. To examine my first aim I will describe and examine the stepfather-stepson culture of support in six stepfamily systems. To achieve my second aim I will identify, describe, and examine practices and processes of communicating support in stepfather-stepson relationships. In the end I seek to offer an ecologically valid, heuristic look at stepfather-stepson communication which can be used as a descriptive base to inform stepfamily interventions.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

To understand the role of support in stepfather-stepchild relationships, this chapter reviews two bodies of research. First I review research on stepfathers, stepfathering, and fathering. Because of the intersections between fathering and stepfathering in the research literature, I use the term (step)fathering to refer to research that spans both categories. Next I present a review of research examining supportive communication.

Fathering, Stepfathering, and Communication

From my review of the literature on (step)fathering and communication, three observations seem evident to me. First, (step)fathering is not an independent activity but occurs within a web of other relationships. Second, the more effort a father puts into his relationship with his child, the more he gets out of it for himself and for his children. Third, the literature suggests that fathering and stepfathering are somewhat different activities. In this section, I review some of what is known about stepfathering and relevant research supporting each of these claims, as well as suggest how stepfather involvement is predicted. I conclude this section abstracting principles from the literature I incorporate into my dissertation.

Stepfathering as a relational act. It is important to remember that fathering is not an autonomous act but a relational one. Palkovitz (2002) reminds readers that the term father – and by extension stepfather – is inherently relational: “A father is only a father in relation to a child” (p. 3). The distinguishing feature between a father and a stepfather is biology. The term father generally implies, at a minimum, a biological
relationship to a child. To stepfather a child signifies just the opposite, no biological relationship. Relationship with a child, then, defines (step)fatherhood.

Secondly, for stepfathers – there is generally a romantic other type of compelling attraction to a child’s mother. Blankenhorn (1995) observes that a stepfather’s relationship is “premised not on fatherhood but on the search for adult companionship” (p. 187). Romantic involvement with a child’s mother is usually the impetus for a stepfather-stepchild relationship. Doucet (2006) suggests that “fathering practices and identities evolve in relation to those enacted by mothers” (p. 217). He derives this conclusion by summarizing over four years of research with men who served as primary-caregivers for their children. His participants stressed that even though they were primary-caregivers, the mother’s role could not be replaced and that even their own practice of fathering was shaped in relation to (and in response to) mothering.

There are also a host of other influences on the stepfather role. Indeed, mothers-as-gatekeepers (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Gaunt, 2008), child gender and disability status (Harris & Morgan, 19991; Lillie, 1993), public policies and child support laws (Cabrera & Peters, 2000; Mincy & Sorensen, 1998), religious group norms and participation (Wilcox & Barthowski, 2005), men’s (and boy’s) conceptions of masculinity and fatherhood (e.g., Pollack, 2006), as well as social class and ethnicity (e.g., Wilson, Chambers, & Woods, 2005) have all been identified in the complex web of relationships that influence father involvement.

**Stepfathering requires involvement.** Another conclusion evident in existing psychological and sociological research on (step)fathers is that, generally, the more effort a father puts into his relationship with his child, the more he gets out of it for himself and
for his children. Reflecting on his research of fathers who self-identified as highly involved, Palkovitz’s (2002) summarizes his findings:

As a social scientist, I am fully convinced that father involvement is neither necessary nor sufficient to foster adult men’s development. However, from interviewing these 40 diverse fathers, each with his own challenges and struggles as men trying to be good dads, I am convinced that men view father involvement to be pivotal in shaping their lives and maturity. …Good fathering has the potential to foster men’s adult development and is perceived by fathers to yield gains in social, emotional, physical health, and career development (pp. 6-7, emphasis added).

This psychological study demonstrated that men’s fathering experiences shaped who they were as men.

Some demographers have also looked at how fathering and stepfathering affect men (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001). Fathering, regardless of family structure, changes men’s behaviors. Fathers work more hours, visit taverns and bars less, and spend more time at home relative to non-fathers (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001). However, family structure does differentiate specific types of behaviors and activities in which fathers are likely to engage. Particularly, stepfathers are less likely to be involved in civic and service organizations and less likely to stay in contact with kin (e.g., their parents and parents-in-law) than co-resident biological fathers (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001). Eggebeen and Knoester’s study supports the notion that fathers get something out of fathering, but also suggests that stepfathering is something that is somehow different than fathering.
**Stepfathering as distinct from fathering.** Parenting research helps clarify some of the difference between fathering and stepfathering. For example, stepfathers tend to be less involved in disciplining, disagreeing, training, teaching, and correcting stepchildren than fathers in biological families (Vuchinich et al., 1991). In their review of parenting and stepparenting, Ganong and Coleman (2004) shows that stepfathers are at a disadvantage vis-à-vis biological fathers in fulfilling all the functions of an authoritative parent (i.e., connection, regulation, autonomy-granting), especially in the early period of stepfamily formation. They report results of a longitudinal study which supported the notion that having stepfathers become friends (connection) with their stepchildren before becoming their disciplinarian (regulation) is very important. Some stepfathers never obtain the responsibility for regulating their stepchild’s behavior. Instead, they support the child’s mother in her parenting endeavors. Ganong and Coleman reported that, while some stepfathers eventually gained enough tenure and/or respect to begin regulating the child, the window of opportunity for this type of relationship seems limited. According to this longitudinal study, the last skill of autonomy-granting was most difficult for a stepfather because he begins his relationship with his stepchild, usually, with no authority over his stepchild’s autonomy. He must therefore first gain control over the child’s autonomy in order to grant it back to the child when appropriate. Although parenting literature suggests that authoritative parenting is ideal for rearing (step)children (Hart, Newell, & Olsen, 2003; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Steinberg, 2001), it may be more of a lofty aim for stepfathers than a reality. Thus, Ganong and Coleman argued that more information is needed about how stepfathers actually participate in rearing their
stepchildren, describing the experiences of stepfathers and moving beyond comparisons with biological fathers.

Toward that end, Ganong and colleagues (1999) explored stepfathers’ affinity seeking strategies and the relationship quality between stepfathers and stepchildren. They used retrospective, semi-structured interviews with 17 stepfamilies, 15 of which were stepfather-mother families, to learn about how stepfathers communicated affinity with their stepchildren. Summarizing their results, Ganong et al. state that, “Although all of the stepparents we interviewed expressed a desire to get along with their stepchildren, some worked more purposefully to develop close relationships than did others” (p. 306). They go on to describe three types of enacted identities: nonseekers, early affinity seekers, and continuous affinity seekers. They found that nonseekers had a distant relationship with stepchildren. Early affinity seekers, characterized by initial but not sustained efforts to seek affinity, had either a close or distant relationship. Finally, continuous affinity seekers, marked by sustained efforts to gain stepchild affinity, had close relationships with stepchildren. This study also provides evidence that stepfathers reap more benefits when they actively seek affinity with stepchildren. If the stepfathers invested much of their time toward affinity-seeking efforts, they generally experienced a corresponding increase in relationship quality with their stepchildren.

What predicts fathering behaviors and investment? Stepfather identity is important in determining stepfather involvement. Fox and Bruce (2001) proposed that fatherhood functions as a result of adopting a fathering role. The degree to which a fathering role is salient to the father, they suggested, varies depending on its internalization, intrinsic reward, and extrinsic reinforcement. They tested whether
fatherhood identity or evolutionary forces (i.e., “continuance of one’s own genetic presence inheritance,” p. 396) better explain why fathers (including some stepfathers) invested in their offspring and found that identity theory was the best predictor of fathering behavior. These analyses also indicated that demographic characteristics (i.e., race, economic level, marital status) are trumped by fatherhood identity. In other words, a father’s identity most influences his enactment of (step)fathering behaviors.

Unfortunately, few men find their role as a stepfather to be salient. White (1994) summarizes Thotis’ (1992) study on stepparenting this way: “Being a stepparent was about as important as belonging to a voluntary association or having a hobby” (p. 111). DeGarmo and Forgatch (2002) report that parenting is less important to stepfathers than their role as a spouse and equally as important as being an employee. Another study on stepfather identity found that in order for a stepfather to claim a stepchild (i.e., consider a stepchild as his own), there must be a shift in how a stepfather thinks and acts (Marsiglio, 2004b). Marsiglio explains that “shared daily contact and practical involvement in their stepchildren’s lives … altered [stepfathers’] views in almost imperceptible ways” (p. 37). Over time, continued interaction with stepchildren changed the thoughts and actions of the stepfathers who eventually “claimed” their stepchildren.

Conclusions about stepfathering. Abstracting from this body of research on fathering and stepfathering, at least four conclusions can be drawn. First, (step)fatherhood cannot be viewed in isolation; it must be considered within the web of relationships surrounding and either supporting or not supporting it. Particularly important are stepfathers’ relationships with their stepchild and with the child’s mother. Second, stepfathering and fathering must be considered separately. While some aspects of
(step)fathering are common to both family structures, there may be uniqueness between the enterprises. Third, there is variability in the level of involvement stepfathers have with their stepchildren. Not all stepfathers are equal. Some seek friendship with their stepchild whereas others do not. Some consider their role as a stepfather important and many do not. Fourth, it is through the process of communicating (e.g., affinity-seeking, shared daily contact) that a stepfathering role becomes salient in men’s lives. Just as the relational view of communication posits, stepfather-stepson relationships are sustained and modified through communication, that is, day-to-day interactions with one another.

These four conclusions drawn from the (step)fathering research guide this dissertation research. They inform its design and direct its focus. First, because fatherhood cannot be viewed in isolation implies that stepfathers must be studied within the context of stepfamilies, and stepfamilies themselves must be studied within the context of social, kinship, religious, vocational, cultural, and legal networks which all bear on stepfathering. For my dissertation, I limit my study to the residential stepfamily household. At a minimum, this household includes a stepchild and that child’s mother, definitive relationships in a stepfather’s life. Second, this dissertation goes beyond comparisons of biological and stepfamily households and adds a descriptive account of stepfathering particularly. Third, this study includes six cases which will allow me to observe different levels of stepfathering investment due to stepfathers’ variable participation in parenting. Finally, I focus on stepfather-stepson interaction; that is, I examine the verbal and nonverbal communication occurring within stepfamilies.
Supportive Communication

Positive relationships are vital for the healthy adolescent development and wellbeing (Moore & Zaff, 2002) and social support is central to maintaining positive relationships (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). Hence, in this section I examine the literature on social support. I begin with a brief definition of social support and then elucidate two aspects of supportive communication: that both action and perception matter in understanding support and that supportive communication conveys both content and relational messages.

Defining social support. Social support, broadly, has been defined as a symbolic process of communication (Albrechet & Adelman, 1987). Communication is required to either provide or receive social support. Wills, Blechman, and McNamara (1996) identify different types of social support: emotional, informational, and instrumental support. Emotional support is characterized by “being there” for someone, a “shoulder to cry on,” “being a good listener,” or a comforting word. Emotional support provides empathy toward a recipient, responding to their affective state and assisting them in coping with their emotions. Informational support is the provision of knowledge in order to aid a recipient with a task, dilemma, or other situation. Informational support is characterized by sharing stories of personal experiences, looking up needed information (e.g., searching online for an answer to a question, referring a book to someone, suggesting a potential resource, such as a pastor or other professional helper). Informational support is defined by the transfer of knowledge (not necessarily novel information) from a support-provider to the target recipient. Importantly, informational support also includes providing advice and information about how youth ought to live (McNeely & Barber, 2010). Finally,
instrumental support is the material transfer of assets. It could be money, cooking a meal, buying school supplies, or providing an allowance. Instrumental support takes dozens of forms, but always communicates some tangible good from one person to another. These classifications of social support help expand the study of supportive communication to include a wide array of behaviors and interactions that might be intended or interpreted as supportive.

Burleson and MacGeorge (2002) offer three reasons why studying supportive communication can be valuable. First, supportive communication promotes health and healing of the body. Well documented and publicized examples include that when children are touched, they experience more positive developmental outcomes (e.g., Peterson et al., 2007). Second, the authors suggest that supportive communication is the basis of personal relationships. Most relationships would not continue without some form of supportive communication. In terms of stepfather-stepchild relationships, supportive communication (e.g., affinity seeking) is important in relational development (Ganong et al., 1999). The third warrant for the study of supportive communication outlined by Burleson and MacGeorge is that supportive communication is human communication at its finest. While some scholars study the “dark side of communication” (e.g., verbal and physical abuse), Burleson and MacGeorge say that study of “supportive communication displays the highest expressions of the human spirit” (p. 375). All of these reasons help provide justification for the study of stepfather-stepchild supportive communication.

**Important aspects of support.** There are at least two implications of viewing social support as a symbolic process. One important implication is that what is considered supportive depends on a support-giver’s behavior and a recipient’s cognitive
interpretations of that behavior. Thus, actual behavior and perceptions of that behavior are interdependent. They interact in complex ways and also vary by individual, relationship, and situation (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). Individuals may have different needs for support, such that some people feel like they need to constantly be supported, while others do not. In terms of relationships, Reis and his colleagues (2004) theorize that the expectation of support increases in particularly close social relationships (e.g., child, spouse). There is little expectation that a stranger will provide social support or that a stranger’s actions will necessarily be interpreted as supportive. Due to cultural norms to “stay away from strangers,” it is more likely that many behaviors enacted by a stranger potentially might be interpreted as “weird” or “creepy” instead of supportive. This example is important to consider in light of stepfamily relationships because stepfathers have a shorter relational history than biological fathers. Stepfathers may enter a stepchild’s life when the “child” is an infant, young child, adolescent, or even adult. Stepfathers, often, have only known their stepchildren from one to two years at the time they begin co-residing. In the eyes of a stepchild, the stepfather may well be a “stranger.”

In addition, Reis, Clark, and Holmes suggest that expectations for support provision are organized by a culturally recognized hierarchy. Certain situations may excuse a support-giver from providing support if he or she is obliged to provide support to a different level in the hierarchy. For example, it is culturally accepted that attending a funeral, an example of providing social support, is typically an acceptable reason to miss a social engagement. From this analysis, it is clear that social support is a complex interaction between behavior and perceptions of behavior and that expectations for support provision
vary as a function of the individuals involved, the level of relationship between individuals, and the culture in which the relationship is situated.

A second implication of viewing social support as a symbolic process is that it contains both content and relationship meanings. Axiomatic of all communication, messages at once define or redefine one’s relationship with an interlocutor as well as transmit some content meaning (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). In terms of supportive communication, this means that all the while a person is providing emotional, informational, or instrumental support they are also sending information about their relationship with the support recipient. Agreeing to help a stepchild work on his or her bike may be a form of informational or instrumental support (the content of the message) but may also communicate to the stepchild that s/he is worth the stepfather’s time (a relational message). Conversely, consider the messages communicated if a stepfather notices his stepdaughter is crying after school one day and says “You’re alright, honey. Stop crying. Chin up.” The stepfather could be engaging in emotional support (content) and at the same time sending the relational message: “Deal with your emotions privately, not with me.” He (re)defines the relationship through the content and relational messages he sends.

**Parent-child support.** Consistent with viewing support as a communicative process, one recent study helps unpack adolescents’ perspectives on what counts as supportive communication from parents. McNeely and Barber (2010) asked 13-17 year old high school students in 12 countries to list four ways their parents showed them love. Rather than use the term “support,” which did not necessarily translate into the native languages of the 12 countries, the research team used the term “love” because of its
universality. While not identical terms, the terms are considered roughly equivalent because behaviors adolescents listed mapped onto extant measures of social support (McNeely & Barber, 2010). The sample included at least 174 respondents in each country. Using iterative emic (within country) and etic (between country) coding, the researchers devised 25 categories of behavior, 14 of which were nominated by at least 5% of all youth. These 14 behaviors were grouped into five categories of parental support. The broadest and most frequently nominated category was *emotional and companionate support* (45.9%) which included behaviors like showing affection and encouragement, talking/listening to youth, showing physical affection, praising youth, and doing activities with the youth. The next most frequently nominated category was *instrumental support* (24.4%). This category included parental provision of needs and wants. Specific behaviors youth reported were providing things I want, providing my necessities, giving me money, supporting my education, taking care of me, and helping me. The next most nominated category for when youth feel loved by parents was when parents *show respect or trust* (14.5%) toward their youth, followed by parents giving of *moral guidance and advice* (10.7%). The last category was *allows freedoms* (9.2%).

Based on this study, informational support is expanded from merely helping provide advice or instruction about an immediate decision or task to include offering moral guidance and advice. Youth in the 12 countries surveyed, also nominated autonomy granting functions of parenting (i.e., allows freedom, shows respect or trust) as a way they feel loved.

Because data for this dissertation research came from stepfamilies in the United States, it is informative to focus on findings in this study specific to the United States site.
Participants in the US included 410 youth (55% female) with mean age of 13.6 (SD = .78) (McNeely & Barber, 2010). Responses in the United States were, in the main, similar to other countries. Youth nominated emotional support most frequently (53.4%) and instrumental support second most frequently (26.6%). In terms of the remaining three categories, 11.5% of youth nominated allows freedom, whereas only 4.8% of US youth listed showing respect or trust and a scant 1.2% (fewer than 9 youth) listed the provision of moral guidance and advice as a way they felt loved. McNeely and Barber (2010) suggest that cross-cultural differences, in the US and elsewhere, result from emic variation around etic constructs. In other words, youth around the globe seem to think emotional support, instrumental support, moral guidance, being granted freedom, and being shown respect are important ways parents show love. Variance in the relative frequency or importance of these behaviors – especially moral guidance, allowing freedom, and showing respect – may be due to cultural influences.

**Conclusions about support.** Support involves a communicative process and includes emotional, instrumental, and informational types. Because both behaviors and perceptions are important in social support interactions, my study incorporates stepchildren’s perceptions of what constitutes “support” for them. I collect their perceptions through formal interviews, informal questioning, self-report measures and observations. Through direct observation of stepfather-stepson messages, I also pay attention to the content and relational meanings of exchanged messages. A recent review of supportive communication articulates a need for qualitative, observational studies of supportive communication in families, stating “Observational studies, daily diary studies and studies that solicit the perspectives of multiple family members on support
transactions are needed to improve our understanding of family social support” (Garner & Cutrona, 2004, p. 505).

The present study is responsive to this call for naturalistic studies of family support and employs multiple methods of data collection to better understand supportive communication specifically between stepfathers and their stepsons.

**Conclusions from the Literature Review**

This chapter has examined research on stepparenting and social support. From this review of the literature certain assumptions underlie this present study, including stepfathering cannot be viewed in isolation, stepfathering is at least somewhat distinct from fathering, not all stepfathers equally invest in their stepchild(ren), and through communication stepfathering becomes a salient identity in men’s lives. My review suggest that parental support is a communicative process involving emotional, instrumental, and informational support (including moral guidance) as well as autonomy granting functions (allowing freedoms and showing trust). Accordingly, this current study takes into account these aspects of parental support.

My dissertation includes in-home observations of supportive communication and interviews with multiple family members (i.e., stepfathers, stepchildren, mothers) to document perceptions of supportive communication in stepfamilies. Specifically, I describe and examine the culture of support in six stepfamily systems and identify, describe, and examine practices and processes of supportive stepfather-stepson communicationconceptual model of support.
Chapter 3: Methods

In essence, my dissertation is a modified replication of a study of family interaction conducted over half a century ago. In 1959 Hess and Handel published *Family Worlds*, an interpretive analysis of “typical” family life. The authors intentionally sampled non-clinical families and delved into the psycho-social milieu of these unique family cultures, describing in detail the behaviors, messages, and perceptions of all family members (adults and children). Their analysis centered on five challenges common to family life. The challenges Hess and Handel discussed transcend both time and family structure; that is, contemporary families as well as step and non-step families must: 1) manage autonomy and connectedness, 2) synchronize images of one another, 3) author family themes, 4) define boundaries around and within the family, and 5) deal with biosocial realities. The primary means at the disposal of (step)family members to address these challenges is communication.

*Family Worlds* gains its prominence as an influential research piece through its thoughtful analysis woven into provocative description. In the five decades since Hess and Handel’s publication, however, the “typical” American family has changed (for review see Casper & Bianchi, 2002). While Hess and Handel’s work is far from obsolete because all families must deal with the transcendent issues they discuss in their book, understanding the unique dimensions of particular types of families (e.g., stepfamilies) can aid practitioners and researchers interested in those particular family forms. This dissertation utilizes a qualitative case study approach, like Hess and Handel, in order to contribute a descriptive analysis of “typical” stepfamily life.
Qualitative Methodology

The methodological approach was to conduct a series of ethnographic case studies. Ethnography, composed of two Greek words meaning culture (*ethno*) and writing (*graphos*), is the study of a particular culture. Ethnography uses culture as an “orienting concept,” a lens to bring into focus common behaviors and/or beliefs of a social group; and, ethnography is concerned with “attributing” culture to a social group (Wolcott, 2008, p. 100-101). Culture is often a tacit force which organizes social life; therefore, ethnographers abstract from group members’ overt behaviors and stated beliefs to attribute culture to a group. Attributing culture, the unifying forces of group members’ overt behaviors and beliefs, is the task of ethnography and requires researchers to amass “ethnographic evidence” in the form of observations or insiders’ statements in order to support their claims (Wolcott, 2008).

Case study research is concerned with describing and interpreting a particular case (i.e., *intrinsic case study*) and/or an issue manifested in a case (i.e., *instrumental case study*) (Stake, 1995). A case is a functioning, integrated, and bounded system (Stake, 1995). My research focuses on the latter, depicting supportive and unsupportive communication observed in stepfather-stepson relationships. This ethnographic case study, then, seeks to describe the culture or cultural issue bounded within a particular case. This study describes six distinct cultures of support.

Building on the work of Hess and Handel (1959) who argued that families occupy unique psycho-social family worlds, families are considered unique cultures. This perspective accords with the study of relational cultures (Wood, 1982) and suggests that families share a “privately transacted system of understandings that coordinate attitudes,
actions, and identities” (p. 76) of its members. Removing the condition that relational
culture is private, this definition foregrounds the role of communication (i.e., “transacted
system of understandings”) in a family culture. Hess and Handel (1959) referred to this
transacted system as a “family theme” (p.11) and “congruence of images” (p. 6). Masten
and Shaffer (2006) call it a family’s own “internal culture and rituals” (p. 12). Gilchrist
and Williams (1999) define culture as “the assumed beliefs and norms of a group, its
shared sense of reality” (P. 71). Common to all of these definitions is the idea that
families’ attitudes, actions, and identities are influenced by an implied, although perhaps
taken-for-granted, organizing force termed culture. Because each family presents a
unique culture and because culture is used as a lens for analysis, this is an ethnographic
study. Six stepfamily cultures of support are described and examined with particular
emphasis on the communication of support between stepfathers and their 10-14 year old
stepsons. True to ethnographic methods, I seek to investigate the construct of support
from the perspectives of cultural insiders (Fetterman, 2010), that is, stepfamily members.

Sampling

Case study research does not follow probabilistic sampling logic (Stake, 1995;
Tellis, 1997). Selection, or definition, of a case is theoretical (Hamel, Dufour, & Fortin,
1993); a case is chosen because it is particularly suited for examination or potentially
displays phenomenon under investigation. For the current study, cases were identified
using multiple recruitment strategies (detailed below). First, I utilized a sequential mixed
methods design (Teddlie & Yu, 2007) and selected cases from a preliminary survey of
primary caregivers of 10-14 year old children. This age range was selected to enable
examination of support during early adolescence. Parental influence is still significant for
youth in early adolescence but diminishes as they age (see Molgaard, Kumpfer, & Fleming, 2001; Molgaard, Spoth, & Redmond, 2000), and the transition into later adolescence has been shown to be particularly difficult time for stepchildren, often catalyzing dormant adjustment problems (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Given these issues, early adolescence was targeted as a selection criterion because understanding supportive communication during this point in the stepson’s lifespan may be critical for the stepfathers’ engagement in supportive communication and other socialization practices.

Along with age, four additional selection criteria were employed in order to assure a fairly homogeneous sample. First, only families with stepfathers in residence were recruited. Second, demographics from the survey were used to make sure the sample was homogeneous, to reduce variation and limit the range of the claims to be made from this research (Patton, 2002). Caucasian, married, middle class families were recruited from the survey. Third, only male stepchildren were included in this study. Research on youth outcomes has identified differing affects for males and females as well as differing susceptibility to stepfathers’ influence (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Schmeckle, 2007; White, 1994), so it seems reasonable that communicating support to a stepdaughter may be completely different than communicating support to a stepson. Finally, as a product of the recruitment methods employed in this study, in five of the six stepfamilies, the stepson was involved in church or Boy Scouts of America. Using these sampling methods and selection criteria fits under the rubric of sequential mixed methods sampling and facilitated homogeneous and criterion sampling (Patton, 2002) of participants for an in situ, in-depth qualitative
investigation of support in stepfather-stepson dyads. Benefits of homogeneous sampling are that it provides focus and reduces variation; that is, using this sampling allowed me to focus on stepfather-stepson supportive communication while reducing the variation related to demographic characteristics. Another benefit of homogeneous sampling is that it helps bracket the interpretation of findings, that is, using a homogeneous sample helps delimit findings and aids transparent interpretation of findings from the study. For this study, homogeneous criterion sampling facilitated purposive selection of the most suitable cases for investigation.

Six cases were selected as a tradeoff between detailed depiction of one case and breadth of understanding across cases. While selecting only one case potentially would provide the most detailed understanding of stepfather-stepson supportive communication (Wolcott, 2008), it would provide the most limited breadth of understanding the phenomenon of support. Thus, in order to add breadth to the understanding of supportive stepfather-stepson communication, I opted to gain an in-depth understanding of six cases. Framed as a multiple case study (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009), this research design allows for synthesis among cases in addition to in-depth understanding of the unique aspects of each case.

Recruitment

Recruitment was an iterative process using multiple strategies. First, a survey study served as a mechanism to identify and recruit possible participants. In that stepfamily survey study, I sampled 138 primary caregivers of 10-14 year old children through the *Families Interested in Research Studies* (FIRST) database, a *Child, Youth, and Family Consortium* (CYFC) funded project designed to facilitate the recruitment of
families by Penn State researchers. The FIRSt database contains over 3000 entries of families, including the birthdates of children and contact information for the parents. FIRSt guidelines suggest contacting two or three times as many families as needed, so approximately 450 families were contacted for this survey study.

To participate in the survey, participants were first contacted via letter in December 2009 and January 2010. In the recruitment mailing, prospective participants were assigned a code number to enter during the survey. Recruitment letters were followed up with a phone call in order to describe the study. Those who agreed to participate were emailed instructions for accessing the online survey. Families without internet access were given the option of completing the survey over the telephone or via mail. All participating families were sent a follow-up post card thanking them for their participation. Participating families were entered into a drawing to win a $50 Visa gift card. Awards were distributed at the conclusion of the study in March 2010.

Interested adults accessed the online survey instrument through SurveyMonkey.Com. Instructions indicated that surveys were to be completed by the 10-14 year old child’s “primary caregiver.” The instrument began with an overview of the project (informed consent form). After reading the informed consent, participants were required to respond to the prompt "I agree to participate" by selecting either "yes" or "no.” If they selected no, they were directed to a page thanking them for their time. If participants select yes, the survey began by asking a few demographic and household composition questions (i.e., code number, age, gender, education levels of all family members, race/ethnicity of respondent, annual household income, zip code). Next they were asked questions about family structure (e.g., marital status, step or biological
family, etc.) and family composition. Then, participants completed instruments assessing family communication and youth outcomes. The last question of the survey asked: Are you willing to be contacted about participating in a different, follow-up research project involving home visits twice a week over the course of one month? Sixty eight percent (n = 91) marked “yes.”

Of the 91 who agreed to be contacted, 75 were intact biological families and four were single-mother headed households, leaving 12 stepfamilies that potentially fit the criteria for the study. Of the 12 stepfamilies, 8 were excluded due to study criteria. Specifically, they did not contain a 10-14 year old stepson and a co-resident stepfather. Five contained a 10-14 year old stepdaughter instead of a stepson, one was headed by a stepmother and a biological father, one was a lesbian household headed by a mother and a stepmother, and one was a stepfamily with biological children in residence and a nonresident stepchild. The remaining four families were invited to participate in the present study via emails sent August 25, 2010. The email reminded families of the survey in which they participated, reiterated the criteria of the present study, and contained an attached document detailing the purpose, eligibility, and requirements of the present study (see Appendix A).

I followed up with families by calling them to further explain the second “follow-up” study and set-up an in-home recruitment visit and/or orientation session. Two families declined to participate. A third family expressed interest in participating, but eventually declined due to a death in the family. The fourth family considered participating but ultimately decided not to participate in the study because they would not be able to accommodate observational visits into their busy schedule.
The second method of recruitment involved over-sampling stepfamilies to participate in the online survey described above. Announcements were placed on stepfamily websites and were distributed through stepfamily email lists maintained by stepfamily support groups. Leaders listed on the National Stepfamily Resource Center website were emailed asking for help in distributing information about the stepfamily study being conducted online. An announcement was also distributed through the Penn State Faculty and Staff email listserv. This recruitment script was similar to the first.

In total, 24 stepfamilies participated in the online survey. Of the 24, only two lived within the target geographic area and could feasibly be involved in the study. One participant did not grant permission to be contacted again, and the other participant was an African American family. No families who were contacted through this online oversampling of stepfamilies were recruited for the study.

In order to recruit additional families who fit the criteria of the study, a more targeted recruitment procedure ensued. I began contacting churches in the target geographic area trying to speak with leaders of youth groups and pastors, anyone who potentially had contact with stepfamilies who met the criteria for the study. I also began contacting adult leaders of local Boy Scout of America Troops. To be a member of a Boy Scouts of America troop, a boy must be over 10 years old (See Scouts, n.d.). Recruiting boys who were involved in boy scouts, then, ensured that they were at least 10 years old. I contacted 26 churches and Boy Scout leaders. I attempted to talk on the phone with scout leaders but also emailed information about the study, when email addresses were available.
I was impressed with scout leaders’ willingness to help with my study. Many of them called me back within hours of leaving a message, even when they had no families that fit the criteria. The scout leaders also often directed me to other scout leaders in the area who might be of assistance. In my efforts contacting various adult leaders in Boy Scout Troops, I was eventually directed to leaders of two geographic Boy Scout Councils. Individual Troops are organized into regional councils which hold regular meetings for all the Cub Scout and Boy Scout troops in their area. Through my contacts with the Council leaders, I was able to widely distribute information about my study to local troop leaders. In one council, an organizational leader distributed information about the study on my behalf and in the second I personally attended the regular council meeting to deliver recruitment information. Thus, information about the present study went to scout leaders in two regions, both located within the target geographic area.

Once scout leaders learned about the project, they were encouraged to contact families of boys within their troop who fit the study criteria. A typical email read as follows and contained the recruitment document as an attachment:

My name is Jonathan and I'm a grad student at Penn State. I'm writing to see if you would be willing to help me with a project I'm working on through school. I'm trying to locate families with a 10-14 year old boy, his biological mother, and a stepfather and invite them to participate in a research project I'm conducting. I'm writing you to see if you could pass on information about the project to any families in your troop that fit these criteria.
Attached is a document that has details about the study I'm conducting. Basically, I'm asking families if I can get to know them over the course of four weeks. In compensation for participating, families are given up to $475. The study basically involves me getting to know the families by 1) spending time with them as they go about their typical routine (e.g., attending church, getting ready for the day, eating dinner, etc.), 2) interviewing each family member, and 3) having families fill out some online questionnaires. I'm particularly interested in learning about the stepfather-stepson relationship, how it has developed, etc. I'm happy to share more about the project with you. Feel free to email or call.

Through this targeted recruitment method with churches and Boy Scouts I was contacted by seven families who were interested in participating. These families filled out the online survey and were invited to participate if they met the criteria for the study. A total of five families were recruited in this manner.

The sixth family who participated in the study was recruited through a referral from one of the participating families. I contacted the referred family, discussed the study with them, and had them complete the online survey in order to ensure they fit the eligibility criteria.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Data collection, which began October 25, 2010 and ended February 1, 2011, involved home visits, interviews, and follow-up questionnaires completed by stepfathers, mothers, and youth in the study. I visited each family approximately twice per week spending over 4 weeks with each. In reality, each family was different and I tried to schedule visits that worked well for them. For example, one of the stepfathers took a two
week hunting trip to Colorado in the middle of data collection, so I took a hiatus from visits until he returned. This effectively allowed me to visit the family over the course of two months instead of only one. Across families, I scheduled a number of visits which eventually were canceled by the family due to unforeseeable circumstances. I also tried to vary the times when I made visits to each family. That is, instead of visiting the same time of day one the same days of the week, I tried to visit on different days and different times of day. Importantly, too, with each family I tried to schedule an observational visit during a time the family engaged in activity together or some time the stepfather and son were doing a joint activity. For example, after stepson Brad killed his first deer, I scheduled an observational visit around the time that stepfather Darren would teach Brad how to skin the deer. This allowed me a particularly good vantage point for observing how stepfathers communicated with their stepsons in a one-on-one context. A data collection log detailing the date and time of each visit to each family is included in Appendix B.

Qualitative data sources in this study included fieldnotes, memos, interview transcripts, photographs, and self-report measures. All these data were managed electronically primarily using Microsoft OneNote and MaxQDA10. These software packages facilitated data organization and analysis. For example, I typed fieldnotes into Microsoft OneNote pages after observational visits. Doing so placed a date/time stamp on observations and allowed me to group observations by family. OneNote also allowed me to insert links to other files so, for example, if I recorded audio fieldnotes or memos which linked to the typed fieldnotes, I could add a link to the audio file. MaxQDA10 facilitated data coding and retrieval based on specific criteria. For example, I could
retrieve all instances coded as support across youth interview transcripts; or, I could pull interview segments on what makes an ideal stepfather for all members of a particular case.

**Family orientation.** An orientation session was held with each family during which I introduced the project aims and obtained informed consent from mothers, stepfathers, and youth (for sample informed consent, see Appendix C). In addition to these administrative tasks, the orientation session accomplished three primary research activities (see Appendix D). First, I created a detailed diagram of family relationships (i.e., genogram). I asked all present to share their names, ages, and relationships to one another. I also inquired about mother and stepfather marital histories, divorces, and nonresident children. Second, I invited families to create a history of memorable turning points in their stepfamily formation (see Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999). Family members collaboratively shared about events that they saw as important to their development. The genogram recorded critical information about the family structure, whereas the turning point activity gave insight into the developmental history and trajectory of the stepfamily. More generally, the family orientation served to introduce me to the stepfamily and to begin building rapport. Finally, during the orientation session I tried to schedule the next several observational visits with the families. The process of scheduling visits served to provide some data about what the family’s typical daily schedule looked like and what types of activities they normally accomplished. Orientation sessions were audio recorded and also included handwritten drawings and notes (e.g., genogram and timeline).
In-depth interviews. For each case study, I conducted formal, audio recorded, in-depth interviews (H. Rubin & I. Rubin, 2005) with mothers, stepfathers, and the target youth in each stepfamily. Interviews typically took place during the second and third weeks of data collection with each family. This allowed me time to establish some level of rapport with participants before conducting the formal interviews.

Interviews took place face-to-face and lasted between 24 and 45 minutes with youth and typically lasted an hour with adults. The shortest interview was with 10 year old stepson Steve Shorts and lasted only 24 minutes. The longest interview was with Karen Jacobs and lasted 97 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed.

All interviews took place in participants’ homes in a relatively private setting. Although other family members were sometimes in the house when interviews took place, I tried to ensure that the interview would not be overheard and especially that the interviewee felt comfortable that they could share openly and honestly. I suggested good locations to do the interviews, but ultimately acquiesced to participants’ wishes for where to conduct the interview. All participants cooperated with this need for privacy, especially when I conducted interviews with youth. Adults left me alone with youth and if a door could not be closed, while family members were in other rooms they turned on the television or radio to cover the noise of my conversations with the youth. The primary goal of the interviews was to learn each stepfamily members’ perceptions of stepfamily life and how they each perceived support in their stepfamilies.

Interviews with adults were framed as life history interviews (e.g., Atkinson, 1998) (see Appendix D). One of the benefits of using a life history interview was it
helped pinpoint salient events in the development of stepfamily. I asked questions about their early lives (e.g., where they grew up, the type of relationship they had with their parents, what their family of origin was like, etc.). I was particularly interested in their experiences with their mother and father because these relationships can affect how they themselves parent (Forste & Jarvis, 2007; Hess & Handel, 1959). Next I asked questions about their current marriage (e.g., their wedding or commitment ceremony, marital quality, topics of conflict, etc.) because facets of a couple’s marital relationship can affect children in stepfamilies (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). I then inquired about adults’ perceptions of their stepfamily experience, including information about their relationships with the nonresident family, child support orders, visitation rights, and other legal arrangements (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Braithwaite, McBride, & Schrodt, 2003; Gold, 2009; Mason, Harrison-Jay, Svare, & Wolfinger, 2002). The next section of the interview explored their experiences and perceptions involved in communicating support among family members. I probed for stories of success and failure in communicating support as well as ideas about what constitutes an ideal stepfather. Finally, I asked questions about what life lessons mothers and stepfathers wanted to teach their (step)children and what were the family’s values (Hess & Handel, 1959). I concluded my interviews with the adults in the study by asking if there was anything else I should know about living in their stepfamily or about being a supportive stepfather.

Interviews with youth followed a semi-structured protocol (see Appendix D). Compared with the adult interviews, interviews with youth were slightly more focused. I asked youth to share about their relationships with their mother, biological father,
stepfather, and other family members. I tried to explore in detail youths’ relationships with their stepfathers. I probed about how they first met, what their first interactions were like, how their relationship developed, as well as the current state of their relationship. I also explored stepchildren’s perspectives on supportive communication. Finally, I asked questions about life lessons and family values youth felt their mothers, stepfathers, and biological fathers tried to instill in them. Like the adult interviews, I concluded the youth interviews by asking if there was anything else I needed to learn about being part of their stepfamily.

**Observational research.** In addition to the orientation session and separate, private interviews with stepfathers, mothers, and youth, observational visits were completed with each family. I spent at least 2 hours per visit, and I visited each family at least 6 times.

Observational research for this project included joining the stepfamily members for three or more routine family activities (e.g., church attendance, family dinner, Boy Scout meeting, etc.). Because I joined the family for routine activities, they were not, in some ways, routine (Jordan, 2006). This issue, referred to as “reactivity,” bears comment. I tried to minimize the impact of my presence on each family situation by developing rapport and visiting over the course of a month. Evidence from my observations supports the idea that reactivity decreased as participating families became more accustomed to my presence. For example, in one family I witnessed more arguments between siblings during the last half of my visits whereas I did not see or hear any during the first half of my visits.
Despite challenges associated with researcher reactivity, participant observation of family activities provided important data otherwise inaccessible by other means. Specifically, watching family members interact during typical events in their own homes allowed me to witness the process of communicating support. Observational research in this study was particularly important because it adds to the ecological validity of this project. Moreover, using observational methods documented *prospective* accounts of support and of stepfather-stepson communication rather than relying solely on retrospective accounts. Reviews of stepfamily communication as well as reviews of social support in families both claim there is a need for observational studies like the one conducted (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2004; Garner & Cutrona, 2004).

Observations included describing the location, characters, mannerisms, nonverbal behaviors, and salient impressions of the family’s interaction. Note-taking was guided by my research aims, particularly the first two aims: to describe the culture of support in the six cases and to document and describe supportive communication.

My observations were recorded in fieldnotes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), which were written accounts – *inscriptions* – of dynamic events which allowed me to revisit these events for analytic purposes. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw explain:

As inscriptions, fieldnotes are products of and reflect conventions for *transforming* witnessed events, persons, and places into words on paper. In part, this transformation involves inevitable processes of *selection*. … But more significantly, descriptive fieldnotes also inevitably *present or frame* objects in particular ways, “missing” other ways that events might have been positioned or framed. And these presentations reflect and incorporate sensitivities, meanings,
and understandings the field researcher has gleaned from having been close to and participated in the described events (p. 9, emphasis in original).

Thus, fieldnotes were taken throughout each case study, selecting and framing phenomena into documented accounts.

Fieldnotes were recorded immediately following observational visits. I sat in cafes, in my car, or at my home office documenting my observations by audio recording or typing fieldnotes. At times, these post hoc notes were guided by jottings, or shorthand notes taken during the observational visit. For example, I sometimes wrote a few words or phrases on the back of a business card during my visit and then after my visit expounded on each of the words or phrases. During a few observational visits, I wrote fieldnotes by hand in situ, that is, during my observational visits in the homes of the participants. Jottings or handwritten notes were scanned into OneNote as pictures.

In addition to fieldnotes, data included ongoing reflections on families and supportive communication between stepfathers and sons. Periodic fieldnote summaries also were created to aid the ongoing analysis of data. These ongoing reflections and summaries were documented in memos (Emerson et al., 1995). Memos were either audio recorded or typed into OneNote. Once all data were collected, I organized and synthesized the data set. For audio recorded fieldnotes and for orientation sessions, I typed summaries of the data in OneNote. These summaries put on paper emerging ideas and mini-hypotheses, small scale predictions or explanations of phenomena (Weiss, 1994), allowing me to examine particular behaviors for follow-up observation and consider different ways these phenomena might be framed.
As part of fieldnote observations, I was mindful of two aspects of nonverbal behavior. First, I watched for the turning toward, turning away behaviors (Driver & Gottman, 2004). Gottman and colleagues noticed that “some couples engaged in neutral interactions differently” (p. 213), and developed the turning system to capture the subtle emotional bids of otherwise “neutral” everyday interactions. Because the majority of day-to-day communication in natural environments is not highly emotionally charged, noticing small bids for emotional connection was an important tool for understanding supportive communication. Second, I looked for immediacy behaviors between stepfathers and stepchildren, which are actions that potentially decrease the physical and psychological distance between two interlocutors (P. Andersen & J. Andersen, 2005). Examples of immediacy behaviors include large amounts of eye gaze, close proximity, physical touch, and direct body orientation. Stepfathers who engaged in immediacy behaviors with their stepsons appeared warm and friendly toward one another and seemed to enjoy their interaction. Being mindful of these two packages of nonverbal cues helped me characterize stepfather-stepson relationships.

**Self-report measures.** For descriptive purposes rather than predictive purposes, stepfathers, mothers, and youth were also asked to visit a secure, online survey in order to complete a variety of self-report instruments (see Appendix D). These questionnaires were completed toward the conclusion of observational visits. Specifically, stepfathers and mothers filled out the family communication environments scale (FCE: Fitzpatrick & Ritche, 1994), and the parent-child supportive relationships scale (P-CSRS: White & Gilbreth, 2001). Stepchildren also completed an online survey containing the FCE, and
the P-CSRS. Youth also completed the parent subscale on the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS) (Malecki, Demaray, & Elliott, 2000).

The Family Communication Environments scale (Fitzpatrick & Ritche, 1994) asks participants to describe their perceptions of their expectations and beliefs about family interactions. Specifically, the instrument assesses the openness of family communication as well as the relative degree of conformity expected. This instrument is used to help clarify stepfathers, stepsons, and mothers’ relationships.

All family members also completed the parent-child supportive relationships scale (P-CSRS: White & Gilbreth, 2001). This six-item instrument has been used in previous research to assess stepfather support. In this study, the P-CSRS provided a way of understanding participants’ perceptions of stepfather-stepson and mother-son support.

Youth also completed another instrument to assess their perceptions of support received from stepfathers, mothers, and biological fathers. The Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS: Malecki, Demaray, & Elliott, 2000) asks youth to rate how frequently support givers (i.e., stepfathers, mothers, and biological fathers) participate twenty specific behaviors as well as how important it is to the youth that the support giver performs the behaviors. Because perception of support is equally important to actual supportive behaviors (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004) these instruments (P-CSRS and CCCS) which assess stepson perceptions of support add valuable information about the communication of support between stepfathers and stepsons.

Stepfamily members (both adults and children) completed two additional instruments as part of their online questionnaire: a sentence completion exercise and a family leisure activities scale. The sentence completion exercise was used in Hess and
Handel’s original 1959 publication of *Family Worlds*. Instruction for this task read:
Complete all of these sentences as fast as you can. Write the first idea that comes to your mind!

The sentence completion instrument is designed to probe participants associations with various aspects of family life. It originally entailed fifty-five sentence probes for adults and forty-three for children. Six items related to stepfamily experience were added to the adult probes and nine to the child probes. Examples of probes include: Our family…; Stepfamilies sometimes…; Most men…; My stepfather…; When things go wrong, Mother…; When Father comes home….” The leisure scale provides valuable information on how each stepfamily member spends his or her time. The scale assesses how often a participant engages in a certain behavior as well as how enjoyable it is. It consists of forty-three specific activities that are completed in four settings: alone, with friends, with family, or in the community. These data helped me understand how much time stepfather and stepchildren spend with one another and how they perceive this time.

Quantifiable self-report data was collected in this study for three reasons. First, acquiring data from questionnaires expanded information gathered from in-depth interviews because questionnaires covered different domains of family life than interviews, thus providing a more complete account of family life (Bryman, 2006; Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). Second, collecting data via self-report measures helped triangulate (Stake, 1995) data about perceptions of support collected through interviews. Finally, ethnographers periodically use quantified variable scores as “a comparative basis for reporting on the group being studied” (Wolcott, 2005, p. 56). In other words, quantitative measures juxtapose qualitative data from these cases with a
larger body of quantitative research by situating these six families into a distribution of families who have taken the same quantitative instruments. Just as demographic characteristics of the cases provide a rudimentary, starting point for understandings ways these cases fit into larger social groupings (e.g., Caucasian stepfamilies, middle class families, etc.) so too the findings from quantitative scales allow for elementary classification into broader social groups who report similar scores on the quantitative scales (e.g., families with similar support scores).

In an effort to bolster the confirmability – or, the xyz (Cite Huberman 1987) – of my research, I devised a notation system for referencing the variety of data sources. Throughout this document when fieldnotes or interviews are quoted, they are referenced with these codes. The format for the code is family number (a nominal code ordered sequentially based on when the family volunteered to participate in the study) followed by document or participant number. Fieldnotes are numbered 1 to 9 whereas interviews and self-reports are numbered 01, 02, and 03 for mothers, stepfathers, and stepsons respectively. For fieldnotes, the numbering system gives readers an easy way to recognize how many visits were completed when I made particular observations. My first face-to-face contact with every family is demarked by the number one and my last by eight or nine. For example, to reference data that came from the third observational visit with the King family I put 2.3. When referencing an interview or self-report, I write the family number followed by a participant number. For example, my interview with Darren Jacobs is parenthetically cited 3.02. Further, when quoting from interviews, I also include the paragraph number. So, a quotation from the fifteenth paragraph in my interview with Darren Jacobs would be cited 3.02-15. Finally, in order to indicate when data came from
self-report questionnaires, I note parenthetically the family, person, and “SR.” For example, Darren Jacobs would be 3.02-SR and his wife, Karen, would be denoted with 3.01-SR. The intent of using this citation system is to make transparent what data sources were referenced or quoted and add to the confirmability of my results through facilitating an audit of findings (Cresswell & Miller, 2000). The data collection log in Appendix B contains a code for each fieldnote and interview.

**Data Analysis**

In qualitative studies like the one conducted, data analysis is intrinsic to every segment of the project (Baptiste, 2001). Just as analysis is intrinsic to all aspects of the study, I was intrinsic to all aspects of analysis. Perhaps even more than in other types of qualitative research, ethnographic case studies required me, as the researcher, to be the instrument not only of data collection but also of analysis. Removing the guise of objectivity, I was indelibly integrated into the analytic process. My memories, interests, and impressions influenced the entire endeavor. I followed Bahktin’s admonition on ethnographic study: “Creative understanding does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. … Outsideness is the most powerful lever of understanding” (Emerson, 1996, p. 110). McCracken (1988) agrees when he notes that a researcher’s own cultural experiences and introspection provide “vitaly important intellectual capital without which analysis is the poorer” (p. 34). I do not try to veil that I was intricate to every aspect of analysis, but I do attempt in this section to make my involvement transparent by sharing the story of my process of discovery.

Analysis was ongoing and proceeded in an iterative fashion. Fieldnotes, which necessarily select information to include and to disregard, were inscribed after each visit.
Audio records of interviews were transcribed, and transcripts checked for accuracy by listening to audio recordings while reading the transcript. Theoretical inklings in the form of analytic memos were drafted early in the process of data collection (Emerson et al., 1995). Additional memos were created and developed. Fieldnotes and memos were organized. Qualitative coding took place after on-site data collection with each family was complete. Coding itself was an iterative process involving multiple “passes” through the data shifting focus from general to particular and back to the general.

**Field analysis.** During the three months of data collection, I worked to keep notes organized. I kept a log of all my activities which provided a system of checks and balances. During the months of data collection, analysis consisted of reviewing fieldnotes and memoing.

One particularly important aspect of field analysis was the initial visit to each family. In a sense, field analysis began with each family by constructing a genogram and timeline for the family, activities which occurred during the orientation session. These pictorial representations of the family system proved invaluable for providing a systemic overview of relevant relationships and key events which impacted the stepfamily in general and the stepfather-stepson relationship in particular.

Preliminary analysis of the orientation sessions provided a broad overview of important topics and characters which I subsequently learned about in detail through interviews and conversations during observational visits. In addition, the genogram provided me a holistic look at the stepfamily system and relevant other extended family systems, including stepsons’ nonresident households as well as stepfathers’ and mothers’ families of origin. The genogram also introduced me to extended family members, some
of who I met during subsequent observational visits and some who I never met. The
timeline provided me background information about the residential histories of the
stepfamilies and key events which occurred in stepfamilies’ lives. Orientation session
notes, including the genogram and the timeline, helped initiate, direct, and inform field
analysis.

**Armchair analysis.** After three months of data collection, I began the focused
phase of analysis in which I classified and grouped data (Baptiste, 2001). Data from
fieldnotes, transcripts, memos, and stepfamily members’ self-reports were sorted, coded,
and integrated (Weiss, 1994) to craft a working case study report (Stake, 1995). This
work included generating a workable data set (sorting) and then making several “passes”
through the data (coding and integrating) while simultaneously drafting iterations of the
findings (working report).

Three steps were taken to create a working data set: (1) checking the
professionally produced transcripts for accuracy by listening to audio recordings while
reading the transcripts and correcting any errors or filling in missing information, (2)
personally transcribing any interviews which had not been transcribed by others, and (3)
listening to the recordings of the orientation sessions and any audio fieldnotes or memos
and typing summaries of these audio files. Once all notes were accessible in written form,
I aggregated and saved files into word documents which I then uploaded into qualitative
data analysis software packages NVivo 8 and MaxQDA10. This first interaction with the
data corpus, as a whole, served to familiarize me with the data. Although I was a
participant in the creation of the data set (i.e., I conducted the interviews, it was my voice
in the audio files, I typed the fieldnotes, etc.), sorting the data into a workable data set
allowed me to distance myself from it slightly and gave me the opportunity to approach
the data with a “fresh” perspective. Generating a workable data set further served to
familiarize me with the data.

**Within case analysis: Culture of support.** My first “pass” through the data
involved the use of two qualitative data analysis software packages, NVivo 8 and
MaxQDA10. Because I was most familiar with NVivo 8, I used it to facilitate my first
attempt at coding the data and make my initial pass through the data. This first pass
involved open coding (Charmaz, 2005) of interview transcripts and fieldnotes for three
cases, that is, half of the data. I generated twenty-four codes in my initial reading, many
related only to the interview topics which, in a sense were de facto, a priori codes that I
forced on the data through my interview questions (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

During my next analysis session, I switched software programs and coded through
the other half of the data using MaxQDA10. For my coding in MaxQDA10, I divided the
data into relatively exclusive categories based on the interview topics. For example, I
coded stepfather, mother, and youth interview segments about the ideal stepfather into
one code. In addition to dividing the transcripts into components, during this read-
through I created a code labeled (un)support in action.

Because I preferred the visual tools integrated into MaxQDA10 as well as the
relative speed of operating the program on my processor compared with NVivo 8, I
everually opted to use MaxQDA10 for the majority of my coding analysis and data
management. However, one limitation of the software was that it did not import graphics
within the text document containing fieldnotes. Therefore, I continued to refer to
OneNote for graphics and handwritten notes (e.g., genograms). I used these programs in tandem, with Microsoft Word which I used as a space for writing.

At this point I began reading and analyzing data from adult and youth questionnaires. Quantitative scales and self-report measures added descriptive information about stepfamily members, their relationships with one another, and self-perceptions. For example, the sentence completion exercise was particularly useful in understanding perceptions of the role each person played or should play in the family. Because youth responded to some of the same questions about their father, mother, and stepfather, looking at patterns of responses from youth also helped clarify their perceptions of these three parental influences. Stepfathers, mothers, and youth all reported on the family communication environment (Fitzpatrick & Ritche, 1994) which allowed me to compare the relative similarity of perceptions on family expressiveness and conformity. Information from the leisure scale completed by participants also directed my attention to differences in how stepchildren spent time with their stepfather, their nonresident biological father, and their mother, as well as the relative importance of the time they spent. Taken together, these self-report measures and quantitative scales aided me in understanding members’ perceptions of their families.

A few days after my initial pass through the data, I went back through the data and began dissecting the code (un)support in action into various components, 10 to be exact. I used these passes through the data to aid in an analytical exercise I used at that time referred to by some as “writing for discovery” (Richardson & St.Pierre, p. 967) or analytic and researcher memos (Emerson et al., 1995). Essentially I drafted “free writes” about each of the six families, putting on paper my thoughts and impressions about the
culture of support in each family. For each of the cases I tried to depict the story of the family formation in the words of the family members. I traced the individual histories of the stepfather and mother, shared the circumstances surrounding the birth of the target stepchild, and communicated the story of how the two met. I did this for each of the cases. But, when I read back through these stories, there was little to no evidence that supported the claims I was making regarding the families’ culture of support. I had hunches about what was going on in each stepfamily regarding support, but I realized I had only written a general story about each family’s history. I had not met Weiss’ (1994) criteria of “all good reports” by telling “a coherent story” (p. 153). So, I turned back to the data to gain a more specific idea of how families communicated support.

I returned to the data and thought about the numerous categories I had for support. Some of the codes I had created only encompassed two or three statements from the data (interviews or fieldnotes) and were specific to a single stepfamily. Others contained numerous instances from across cases. As I continued to work with the data, I decided I needed a new coding system. I needed to simplify and clarify what I had done in order to make it more sensible and transparent. At this point in the process I returned to my initial coding, sorted my codes into three categories: interview topics, emerging issues, and support. I sorted some of my initial coding into these three categories and then coded through all stepfather interviews for instances of emotional, informational, and instrumental support. I kept what I had sorted into (un)support in action as a separate code, and I added two additional codes which, at that time, I did not know how to classify. One was “discipline/teaching” and the other was “shared time.”
My next iteration of writing drafts was much more focused on support and on the culture of support in the six stepfamily systems. This expanded and focused my initial free writes and further grounded them in the data with numerous participant quotations and depictions of support from fieldnotes. Even so, the process of writing was informative. My first two case descriptions were not as clear or focused as my last two. Neither was the writing as cogent. So, in an iterative process I wrote and revised my initial case descriptions until all six case studies presented the culture of support and provided ethnographic evidence to bolster claims of culture I attributed to each group.

**Cross case analysis: Practices and processes of support.** After creating the descriptions of each stepfamily, focusing specifically on their culture of support, I then turned to drafting a cross case analysis (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2008) of support. In order to generate the cross case analysis, I copied data which had been sorted into emotional, informational, and instrumental support into a single document and began considering how different instances within each broad category were related to one another. I arranged and rearranged examples from my coding into broader subcategories of emotional, informational, and instrumental support. I labeled these categories and defined them. My familiarity with the data was an asset because I recalled instances from the descriptions of each family’s culture of support, which helped clarify or add to the cross case analysis. The goal of writing the cross case was not to show that the dimensions were common to all cases but to present as many instances and types of supportive communication as possible and to lay out all the support tactics available and utilized by stepfathers.
As I engaged in this process, it also became clear that there were several patterns in the data – aspects of supportive communication that were common to a few or all cases in this study. I began to tentatively outline what were the common themes as part of a model of support while still completing my draft of the practices and processes of communicating support. I then pursued a targeted analysis (i.e., mining data for specific information) to discover in detail how the themes played out in each case. For example, when I discovered that in three of the six cases stepsons used the “Dad” label, I read back through fieldnotes and interview transcripts from the other three cases to learn what terminology stepsons in those cases used to refer to the stepfather. Noticing salient experiences and communication within cases allowed me to examine the breadth and nuance of the particular phenomenon across cases. Continuing the example of the “Dad” label, as I culled data for examples of its use I discovered that one stepson (Brad) only used “Dad” when his stepfather’s biological children were present and were employing the term. This helped me address the question, under what circumstances the term was used for youth in this study.

It was in the process of thinking about the various types of support that I noticed all the coding I had done on emotional, informational, and instrumental support was an abstraction for the actual communication of support. In other words, the messages seemed to function, at a relational level, as emotional, informational, or instrumental support; but, the processes of communicating support between stepfathers and sons was more diverse. My coding of the interview did not match completely with my coding of the fieldnotes. The stories and statements in the interviews seemed to evidence a particular type of support; and, for the most part stories wrapped around the single,
abstract type of support. During my observations, however, various types of support were communicated almost constantly when stepfathers were interacting with their stepsons. Within one brief interaction I would note all three types of support.

My thinking about the issue of support began to evolve around the concept of micro support messages, or the individual messages communicated by a stepfather. I used the term “micro” because my second research aim is to describe how support is communicated within stepfather-stepson relationships. The messages I observed and was pondering seemed to occur within the relationship at a smaller scale. I thought about instances I had witnessed and began to code some of my fieldnote entries for different types of support, not at an abstract relational level but at the level of individual words, phrases, and gestures. I then wrote out an example and demonstrated how micro support messages seemed to work together during an interaction. I then wrote a tentative conceptual definition of micro support messages. I pulled another example of an event I witnessed and started coding the instance for micro support messages. As I continued to think about this concept, it became clearer why even though at a relational level some of the stepfathers were very supportive, at the level of individual messages, or the micro level, stepfather support was ambiguous or almost absent. I drafted this section of my report based on my evolving thinking about micro support messages.

**Patterns: A model of supportive stepfather-stepson communication.** The next step was building a model of supportive stepfather-stepson communication. The within and cross case analyses had produced six, overarching themes. The next step was to take inventory of the concepts about which I had been writing and consider relationships among them. Using concept mapping (Plotnick, 1997) I wrote the six cross case patterns

53
on a piece of paper and began trying to assign relationships among all the terms I had written down. The model I present in this dissertation emerged from these reflections on the data. The model provides a visual representation of how support messages are communicated through relational cultures within stepfamily systems to constitute and define the relationship between stepfathers and stepsons.

**Reflections on analysis.** These methods of analysis allowed me to address each of my research aims in an iterative, reflexive process. Strengths to this method of data analysis include the ability to present a data-near analysis. That is, I use the participants own words, phrases, and ideas throughout the analysis, grounding my observations and claims in the data from each case. The data analysis was also an interactive process wherein I asked participants about observations I made or ideas I had. For example, during my interviews with participants I commonly mentioned things I had observed or ideas I had regarding supportive communication in their stepfamilies. Participants commented on these observations and ideas, clarifying their individual perspective on the issue. Another strength of this method of data analysis is that it allowed me to integrate various data types (method triangulation), that is, I triangulated interview responses with self-report measures with observations to arrive at conclusions about the culture of support in each family, practices and process of support across families, and the model of supportive stepfather-stepson communication. I also integrated perspectives of the stepfather, mother, and youth in order to accomplish the research aims (data triangulation). In case study research, method and data triangulation help add to the credibility of the analysis (Stake, 1995). A final strength to completing a within and cross case analysis was that it not only enabled me to identity the dimensions and components
of a family system (e.g., messages perceived as supportive) but also to describe how those components functioned as interdependent parts in a culture of support. Importantly, this method of data analysis enhanced variable analytic approaches to understanding stepfamily relationships by contributing in-depth information about the intricacies of stepfamily dynamics that contributed to supportive stepfather-stepchild communication.

**Sample Characteristics**

The sample was homogeneous in terms of geography, ethnicity, income, and marital status. All stepfathers were rural, Caucasian, middle class, and married. Another commonality to all stepfathers in this study was that they all fathered biological children before becoming stepfathers to their 10-14 year old stepsons in this study. Stepfathers ranged in age from 31 to 53. In all the homes, there were either two or three children present, although some families included both biologically related children as well as stepchildren whereas others only included stepchildren. To help protect confidentiality pseudonyms are used when referring to people throughout this document and some details related to places and events are omitted. Table 3.1 presents the pseudonyms and ages of those living in the stepfamily household at the time of the study.

Although similar according to these characteristics, the sample varied widely in terms of other dimensions. Table 3.2 presents a snapshot of the families’ history and includes the approximate duration of co-residence at the time of the study, which ranged from 4 years to 11 years. Table 3.2 also presents two measures of their socioeconomic status, income and the highest level of education completed by mothers and stepfathers. Two stepfathers completed high school diplomas; two had associates degrees; one obtained a bachelor’s degree, and one a master’s degree. Mothers were slightly more
educated. Income for all families was between $60,000 and $80,000 in the year 2009. These demographic variables may help readers better understand the situations of these six stepfamily systems.

In an effort to further characterize the sample, it may be helpful to look across families based on their responses to quantitative scales on variables germane to the study. Keep in mind, however, that ethnography in general and ethnographic case studies in particular are not designed for comparison between cases (Wolcott, 2008; Stake, 2005). Instead, they are designed to provide rich and detailed descriptions which might allow a reader to compare cases to other cases or distributions with which s/he is familiar (Stake, 1995; 2005). Therefore, scores in Table 3.3 and Table 3.4 are presented for reference and in order to describe, not compare, the sample of stepfamilies.

Tables 3.3 presents findings from the Family Communication Environments scale (Fitzpatrick & Ritche, 1994) and details perceptions of two aspects of communication: expressiveness and conformity. This table includes mothers’ and stepfathers’ self-reports as well as youth reports of these two dimensions of family communication environments. It also includes youth reports on their biological fathers, with the exception of the one youth who had no contact with his biological father. This table taps into family members’ perceptions of their family communication.

Another variable of primary interest in this study is support. Table 3.4 presents three different perspectives on mother and stepfather support (P-CSRS: White & Gilbreth, 2001). Youth completed the scale answering about their fathers, mothers, and stepfathers. Mothers and stepfathers completed the scale about themselves and their spouses. So, for each family, there are three perspectives on mother support and
stepfather support and one perspective (the youth’s) of father support is included. The scale consists of six items assessing: 1) how frequently the parent praises the youth; 2) how frequently the parent criticizes the youth; 3) the likelihood the youth would talk to the parent if he felt depressed; 4) the likelihood the youth would talk to the parent if he was making a major decision; 5) how much the youth admires the parent; 6) and, a global evaluation of their relationship. Youth consistently reported mothers as more supportive than either stepfathers or biological fathers.
Table 3.1
First and Last Names of Members in all Families (ages in parenthesis) living in stepfamily households.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>The Kings</th>
<th>The Jacobs</th>
<th>The Fishers</th>
<th>The Welivers</th>
<th>The Hollands</th>
<th>The Joneses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stepfather</td>
<td>Nick King (41)</td>
<td>Darren Jacobs (31)</td>
<td>Bill Fisher (45)</td>
<td>Karl Weliver (40)</td>
<td>Buck Holland (53)</td>
<td>Jim Jones (38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Julie King (36)</td>
<td>Karen Jacobs (36)</td>
<td>Pamela Fisher (43)</td>
<td>Kara Weliver (44)</td>
<td>Caroline Holland</td>
<td>Sally Jones (42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target</td>
<td>Christian Smith (11)</td>
<td>Brad Mason (14)</td>
<td>Steve Shorts (10)</td>
<td>Evan Brown (10)</td>
<td>Mitchel Love (14)</td>
<td>Jake Patel (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepson</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Matt Smith (17)</td>
<td>Curtis Jacobs (2)</td>
<td>Sam Shorts (16)</td>
<td>Fred Weliver (17)</td>
<td>John Holland (9)</td>
<td>Jared Patel (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Suzanne Smith (15)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Jane Holland (7)</td>
<td>Daniel Jones (12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2
Family History, Duration and Socioeconomic Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>The Kings</th>
<th>The Jacobs</th>
<th>The Fishers</th>
<th>The Welivers</th>
<th>The Hollands</th>
<th>The Joneses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief Family History</td>
<td>• Met 2001</td>
<td>• Met 2006</td>
<td>• Met 2006</td>
<td>• Met 2006</td>
<td>• Met 1999</td>
<td>• Met 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Moved in 2002</td>
<td>• Moved in 2006</td>
<td>• Moved in 2007</td>
<td>• Married &amp; Moved in 2007</td>
<td>• Married &amp; Moved in 2000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Married 2006</td>
<td>• Married 2007</td>
<td>• Married 2009</td>
<td>• Married &amp; Moved in 2007</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximate Duration of Co-residence</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual Household Income 2009</td>
<td>70-79K</td>
<td>60-69K</td>
<td>60-69K</td>
<td>60-69K</td>
<td>70-79K</td>
<td>70-79K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepfather Education</td>
<td>2-year degree</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>2-year degree</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>Graduate Degree</td>
<td>4-year degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother Education</td>
<td>2-year degree</td>
<td>4-year degree</td>
<td>4-year degree</td>
<td>2-year degree</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>4-year degree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.3
*Family Communication Environments Expressiveness and Conformity Subscales*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>The Kings</th>
<th>The Jacobs</th>
<th>The Fishers</th>
<th>The Welivers</th>
<th>The Hollands</th>
<th>The Joneses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reporter</td>
<td>SR</td>
<td>YR</td>
<td>SR</td>
<td>YR</td>
<td>SR</td>
<td>YR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conformity</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepfather</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepfather</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conformity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>father</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressiveness</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conformity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>father</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expressiveness</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conformity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SR=Self-report, YR=Youth Report
Expressiveness score is sum of 10 items measured on a 5-point scale where higher scores (max 50) represent greater expressiveness
Conformity score is sum of 8 items measured on a 5-point scale where higher scores (max 40) represent greater conformity
Note: Youth report for Welivers and Youth report for Joneses is unreliable and therefore not reported.

Table 3.4
*Parent-Child Supportive Relationships Scale*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>The Kings</th>
<th>The Jacobs</th>
<th>The Fishers</th>
<th>The Welivers</th>
<th>The Hollands</th>
<th>The Joneses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reporter</td>
<td>MR</td>
<td>SR</td>
<td>YR</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepfather</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MR = Mother Report; SR = Stepfather Report; YR = Youth Report
Note: King family YR, one answer left blank for child report on mother. Estimated 3 (midpoint) to compute.
Support score calculated from six items. Four items measures on 5-point scale and 2 measured on 10-point scale where higher scores (max 40) are more supportive.
Chapter 4: Cultures of Support

In this chapter I present the six stepfather-stepson cultures of. This chapter follows notions presented by Hess and Handel (1959) that all families occupy unique psycho-social interiors which are maintained and modified through communication. Stated another way, families develop and maintain particular family cultures, including cultures of support. Because this study is most interested in the stepfather-stepson relationship, this chapter privileges understandings and transactions related to the *relational* cultural of support between stepfathers and their 10-14 year old stepsons. Relational and family cultures may be distinct, but necessarily overlap each other because stepfather-stepson relationships are embedded in stepfamily systems. The purpose of this chapter is to focus on the stepfather-stepson *relational culture* of support as it occurs within the broader *stepfamily system culture* of support. Accordingly, I primarily present interpretations associated with the stepfather-stepson relational culture of support.

Using the term culture to apply at both relational and family levels makes it important to provide a definition of culture that spans both levels. Indeed, the definition of culture employed in this study builds on lines of thought about relational and family cultures. According to Wood (1982), a relational culture is a “privately transacted system of understandings that coordinates attitudes, actions, and identities” (p. 76). Removing the condition that the culture is private, this definition foregrounds the role of communication (i.e., “transacted system of understandings”) in forming and maintaining a relational culture. A relational culture can be seen by examining the role a stepfather assumes and the actions or activities in which he engages.
Family cultures are the organizing force of family life; they shape the amount, quality, and method of family communication. Hess and Handel (1959) referred to this transacted system as a “family theme” (p. 11) and a “congruence of images” (p. 6). Family “themes” are part of the family beliefs, attitudes, and ideas about how things are and how they should be in a family. Themes are granted expression through family interaction and give insight into the core values and assumptions a family holds. Themes shape the content and the style of family communication. The “images” family members hold are essentially attitudes toward family roles, such as what a mother or father should do or how children should behave. Their images of one another and the relative congruence of those images shape the roles each family member plays. The family culture, then, shapes members’ understandings and actions which characterize the role of a stepfather. To summarize, a family culture is a set of images or beliefs held by a family group which vary in their congruence and which manifest in members’ attitudes and actions.

Drawing from definitions at the relational and family levels, culture can be thought of as an invisible force which organizes social life and reciprocally influences and is influenced by interaction within relationships and the family. More specifically, for this study culture is defined as a force that shapes and is shaped by roles, attitudes and expectations, and actions. This definition of culture foregrounds cultural practices (identities, beliefs, and behaviors) that work together in a process of culture creation and modification (Faulkner, Baldwin, Lindsley, & Hecht, 2006; Fetterman, 2010).

Utilizing a single definition for culture provides an efficient lens for analyzing support in stepfather-stepson relationships and stepfamily systems. A single definition,
however, does not imply that the relational and family cultures are the same. Rather, it simplifies the process of examining the interplay between relational and family cultures.

Because culture is a somewhat nebulous force operative in a particular social group it cannot be seen directly but must be attributed (Wolcott, 2008). In order to attribute culture to the stepfather-stepson pairs and to stepfamily systems, findings in this section abstract from observations, interviews, and self-report measures in order to attribute a culture. To understand the relational and family cultures of support in each family, I describe and examine the role of the stepfather and then present attitudes and/or actions in the stepfamily which were prominent. The role of stepfather blends stepfathers’ expectations and experiences with those of his wife and her child(ren). Attitudes and actions in these stepfamilies took form in relational or family disagreements, rituals, and other practices. For each case, I select practices which occurred repeatedly (patterns) or were significant events to stepfathers and stepsons (key events) (see Fetterman, 2010). Thus, by focusing on roles, attitudes, and actions, this chapter describes the culture of support in stepfather-stepson relationships embedded in six stepfamily systems.

**The King Family**

The King family consists of five members. Stepdad Nick King works as a skilled laborer. His work takes him away from his house about half past six o’clock in the morning. He returns to the family’s property around four in the afternoon and has a variety of ongoing projects that occupy the remaining daylight hours at home. His wife, Julie King, holds an associate degree in business and works as an administrative assistant for the local government. She visits the gym every day, goes to the office, and returns
home around six in the evening after about a 25 minute commute. There are three
children in the King family, all of whom are Julie’s biological children. Nick’s 20 year
old biological son, Jonah King, died in a car accident in 2009. Matt Smith, 17, is involved
in a variety of extracurricular activities including soccer, marching band, and drama club.
Suzanne Smith, 15, plays soccer for the high school and has her name in the paper almost
every week of the season. Christian Smith, the youngest of the three and the target youth
in this family, is involved in a homework club after school and the Boy Scouts of
America.

The King family is busy. During soccer season there are after-school practices for
Matt and Suzanne and games the whole family attends. About twice a year, the school
performs a play in which Matt takes part. The family attends together. Nick and Julie
think that getting involved in a variety of activities is healthy for their kids; it keeps them
out of trouble. In line with this dynamic, the stepfather-stepson culture of support in the
King family nurtures involvement and responsibility. As will be made clear, Boy Scouts
of America (BSA) is an important way Nick seeks to support Christian. BSA exposes
him to outdoor recreation, teaches him responsibility, and gets him involved in an
extracurricular activity and outside of the house. This relational culture of support is
integrally fused into the broader family culture of support.

**Nick’s Role as Stepfather**

Nick views fathers as hardworking; he completed the stem “when father comes
home” with “he still has work to do” (2.02-SR). Indeed, when Nick comes home from
work around 4pm, he often has a number of ongoing projects and chores to which he
attends. I visited one afternoon when no one else was home and Nick was feeding and
watering the dogs, cleaning their kennels, and then “taking advantage of the open winter” to chop some firewood (2.8). Despite Nick’s hard work, one of his fears is that he won’t be able to provide for his family (2.02-SR).

Two primary types of interactions shape Nick’s understanding of fatherhood and bear his role as a stepfather. First, Nick gets his ideas of what a father is and how a father should relate to his children from experiences relating with his own father. Second, Nick’s role as stepfather is profoundly influenced by a traumatic event which occurred in 2009. Nick lost Jonah, his only biological son, in a fatal car accident. Interactions with Jonah prior to his death as well as reflections on Nick’s relationship with Jonah following his death significantly influence Nick’s current role as a stepfather. In all, these three domains of interactions help shape how Nick views his role as stepfather.

**Nick’s relationship with his Dad.** The first relationship which profoundly shapes Nick’s understanding of stepfathering is his experience with his own father. Nick’s relationship with his own father defined and modeled what a father-son relationship should look like. Nick’s own role as a father replicates, to a large degree, how his own father enacted the fatherly role. When Nick was young, the relationship was not overly close, but as he aged, Nick came to respect and appreciate his father more and more. Thinking back on his father, Nick writes “my father – was a great dad” (2.02-SR). Nick’s father was a significant influence in his life partly because his mother died when he was 12 years old. He described his relationship with his dad after his mother’s death:

I think dad and I butted heads a little bit in the beginning, but we got along good, my dad and I. Course I thought he was the dumbest man alive until I got to be about 28, 30 years old and then I found out he was pretty smart. … We weren’t
really close. We didn’t do a lot of stuff together, but we always got a long good (2.02-13).

Nick maintained his relationship with his father, and it only grew closer as he got older. In fact, Nick’s own biological son lived with his dad for a couple of years, and Nick would visit his dad every day after work until his father died a few years ago. Nick’s understanding of how a father (and stepfather) ought to behave was modeled by his own father.

Nick took what he learned from his father and replicates it with his sons. When describing his relationship with Jonah, his biological son, he says:

I wish I’d spent a lot more time with him, of course, now. We were like me and my dad. You know, we got along really good and we did things together. But we weren’t super close. I mean, we didn’t sit and talk like best friends, things like that. But we hunted together and things like that. Any time he was doing something in the garage and needed a hand I was helping him, or vice versa (2.02-61).

The phrase “got along good” is the same phrase Nick uses to describe his relationship with his father. Nick not only describes his relationship with his biological son in this way but also his relationship with Christian, his 11 year old stepson. He says, “I wouldn’t say we’re terribly close but we get along good and never have any trouble” (2.02-152).

Nick’s role as a (step)father is influenced by his experience with his own father. He views a father not as someone who was overtly affectionate but someone who can share activities with his sons.
Losing Jonah. Another significant event that redefines Nick’s role as a stepfather was the death of Jonah. In 2009, about six years after becoming a stepfamily, the King family lost Jonah in a fatal car accident. I first learned about the death during the orientation session (2.1). We were gathered around the kitchen table. I was sitting on one side across from Nick. Julie sat beside Nick, Christian next to Julie on the end and Matt next to me. Suzanne was upstairs because she did not want to participate in the family session. I asked Christian what had been some major milestones in their stepfamily experience, but he said, “I don’t know.” I rephrased the question, and opened it up to the entire group. Julie asked for clarification. As I was rephrasing the question, Julie made eye contact with Nick and whispered something. Nick responded “go ahead.” Julie then said “I think we’ve gotten closer. We lost a son last year. Nick’s son. So…” She paused for just a moment before adding, “I think it’s brought us closer as a family.” Nick immediately added “Yeah. Definitely.” Silence filled the air for a moment. I was shocked, not expecting to hear that they had experienced such tragedy. I almost began to back track, sorry I had asked the question. Sorry I had unknowingly stumbled onto such a recent memory. I tripped over my next question, “How old, … was he?” Nick replied “He was 20.” Again silence reigned for a second, while I tried to recover from my shock and tried to continue the interview. “I’m sorry to hear that,” I offered. Nick graciously thanked me. I asked if Nick had any other kids, but he didn’t. I stated the obvious: “So that was a big deal?” He affirmed:

Later in a private interview Nick shared with me the magnitude of the loss:

Yeah, it’s – you can’t even fathom. It’s something that I hope never to have to go through. It’s terrible…. I’ve buried both my mom and dad and that was bad
enough. But that was nothing compared to losing one of your kids. You know, my only kid really, or biological. I mean, these guys are – they’re my kids. They may as well be but it’s – he was the only carrying my blood. So yeah, it’s a big deal. It changes your life completely, your whole outlook on things (2.02-77).

The emotional depth of Nick’s loss was still recent and palpable. It was also an event which, in particular, shapes his outlook on raising his stepson Christian.

During the orientation session (2.1), Julie also said the death “was a big change.” Groping for something to regain my own composure and continue the interview, I seized on the phrase and asked “so what are some of the things you’ve seen change?” Nick began saying “I think I have gotten a little more easy-going, not being such a hard ass … I think I don’t worry about every little thing so much.” He continued, “I’d say that has been the single biggest, even though it was a terrible thing to happen, it was the biggest thing that happened to us.” Julie addressed Nick, “you do a lot with the kids, like the boy scouts, I think it’s brought us closer.” Jonah’s death brought significant change to Nick’s parenting.

While we were talking about the death, Nick admitted that Jonah’s death didn’t automatically bring the family closer together:

[It] could have went the other way too. We had no idea what to expect, how to react or take it. [Julie] and I even talked about it. We don’t know what this was going to do to us. But it made us stronger (2.1).

Nick’s role as a stepfather was fundamentally altered by Jonah’s death. He became less of a “hard ass.” Julie attributed some of Nick’s involvement with Christian in Boy Scouts to the loss. And the family grew closer together through the tragedy.
Nick’s relationship with own father and his experiences loosing Jonah, his only biological son, both shape Nick’s understanding of his role as a stepfather. These experiences factor into the King family culture of support through Nick’s understandings of himself and his role.

**Attitudes and Actions**

This section describes Nick’s attitudes toward work, which were prominently displayed in the first year of the family formation. I then examine how Nick’s role and attitudes played out in two patterns of behavior: family chores and Christian’s involvement in Boy Scouts of America. These two actions reflect the culture of support between Nick and Christian.

**Responsibility.** Nick lives by the motto “there’s nothing worse than a half-ass job” (2.02-181). In the sentence completion exercise, he wrote that “No one can make me – lower my standards” and “nothing makes me madder – than people doing a poor job” (2.02-SR). Nick shared in his interview that doing a job right “might take a little extra time and a little extra effort. But in the end it’s so much more worth it” (2.02-179). Nick developed this perspective from his upbringing. “I was taught that way and I believe that 100 percent. I take great pride in everything I do when it comes to my work. [And] it’s really important and I carry that home with me too” (2.02-181). Because Nick brought his views “home with [him] too,” the desire for quality work pervades the culture of support in the King family. The following story, which pulls together information from the orientation session (2.1) as well as interviews with Julie (2.01) and Nick (2.02), is one of many examples that demonstrates how Nick’s attitudes toward work corresponded with his actions as a stepfather.
For about the first year after moving in together, the Kings rented a small house from Julie’s aunt. Prior to that time, Julie was living with her three kids in her parents’ house. Nick had been living with his father and 13 year old son at his father’s house. He was also building a house on a piece of property he had been purchasing for the past decade. Almost every evening of their first year together Nick worked on finishing construction of the house he was building. He had help from family and friends, especially from Julie’s father, but Nick completed almost all the construction of the house himself. Simultaneously during their first year together Julie went back to business school to better her chances of employment. She earned an associate’s degree and procured a job working for the local government. At that time the kids were in school and also played soccer in a community league. Julie remembers that weekdays after school she would take the kids to soccer practice, work on her homework while they practiced, and then take everyone back to their rental home. Meanwhile, Nick would finish his workday around 4pm and go directly to work on building the house. Shortly after sunset, Nick would return to the rental house and find Julie and the kids back from soccer practice. Julie said, “We would eat and then watch TV, and that would be about it” (2.01-83).

The demanding schedules the family maintained for their first year together made it somewhat difficult for Nick to develop relationships with the children. Julie shared, “It was a little rocky there for a little while because [Nick] wasn’t there a lot. And I understand he was trying to get done so we could move out” (2.01-78). She continued, “I don’t know, I just – I remember. … [a] lot of camping out and things like that. Lot of going to the crick. Well, it’s like I said, [Nick] wasn’t around that, that much” (2.01-79).
Many of the activities Julie recalled were ones she did alone with the kids. Nick confirmed he worked on the house “every weekend, every evening” (2.1). Although they were living together in the rental house, they didn’t start feeling like a family (“gelling a bit” (2.1), in Nick’s words) until they moved out of the rental property and into their new house. Even though the family “stuck by each other” (2.01-183), they seemed to privilege responsibility over relationship. That is, the family sustained a system where Nick would work 12 hour days, seven days a week leaving little time for relational development. Nick’s attitude toward work pushed him to emphasize completing a job and doing it “right” over spending time with his stepchildren during the first year of their family formation.

**Family chores.** Nick’s attitude toward responsibility not only affected his actions during the first year of family formation but also his expectations for family members to be responsible for themselves and to contribute to the upkeep of the family household. Nick’s expectation were not limited to Christian’s behavior but were applied to all his stepchildren, indicating that the relational culture of support between Nick and Christian was part and parcel with the culture of support in the King family. One family activity which clearly displayed this culture is family chores.

When I asked how Nick tried to support Christian, one of the first things he mentioned was “trying to teach him to be a responsible adult by doing his chores and things. … That’s, to me, part of growing up is to learn to handle your chores without being told six times” (2.02-167). Nick views family chores as one important mechanism through which to train responsibility. All the kids have chores. Matt burns the trash, Suzanne cleans dishes, and Christian cares for the dogs.
Regarding Christian’s chores, Nick is pleased with the progress he’s witnessed in the past couple of years. He explained:

[Christian] gets home before me. He’s usually here about a half an hour ‘til I get home. And ‘til I get home the dogs are taken care of and he’s in here and has got himself something to drink and a little snack. He’s – he’s to the point where he takes care of things himself, which he’s 11 so that’s pretty good I think.

It used to be I’d have to come in and he’d be sitting watching TV. And I’d say, “Christian, why are those dogs barking?” “I didn’t feed them yet.” Well, now when I get home the dogs are quiet, he’s already taken care of it. He knows that you take care of that before you take care of yourself, which that’s what I’ve told him all along. You take care of them first. You’ll be okay for five minutes. Take care of the dogs, get them fed, get them watered and clean their kennels. And so he’s come along that way (2.02-168:169; see also 2.8).

Christian is expected to be responsible for this aspect of the household, which aligns with Nick’s attitude toward the importance of responsibility.

**Boy Scouts of America.** A second activity that clearly displays the stepfather-stepson culture of support is Christian’s participation in the Boy Scouts of America. Boy Scouts integrates other aspects of Nick’s role as stepfather, influenced by Julie and by Jonah’s death, as well as his attitude toward responsibility. Nick wants Christian to feel comfortable outdoors and to learn how to take care of things with his hands. In fact, Nick’s growing up outdoors is a big reason he wanted to see Christian involved in Boy Scouts. Julie’s desire to see Christian involved in extracurricular activities also factors
into Christian’s participation in BSA. Finally, Boy Scouts reinforces Nick’s desire to see Christian grow up to be a responsible young man.

Nick shared how his own childhood experiences influenced his decision to involve Christian in BSA. Nick’s boyhood was characterized by outdoor exploration and play with buddies and time with family. He summarizes, “I grew up outside” (2.02-81). He only remembers watching Saturday morning cartoons on television, otherwise it was interaction with nature or with uncles, aunts, cousins, or friends. His parents’ home was “right on the creek” (2.02-83), so he and some near-peer neighbors “literally lived in that water. We were either swimming or fishing all the time. And then in the winter we set traps for muskrats and coons” (2.02-83). When not at the river, Nick talked about going raccoon hunting with his neighbors. “Their dad had – seemed like he must’ve had 50 dogs. They [the neighbors] were big coon hunters and big rabbit hunters. So we were always in the woods, always in the water. I mean, that was just what we did” (2.02-85). Nick said in a sincere nostalgia “yeah, those were my best memories” (2.02-88).

To a large extent, Nick’s childhood determines the types of activities he considers appropriate for his stepson Christian. I asked how his childhood influenced his current fathering practice:

I think [kids] should spend more time outside getting exercise, physical exercise, not couch potato type thing, playing games, computer, TV. That’s a big part of the reason for Boy Scouts because Christian is such a couch potato. We want them to get … moving, to get subjected to some outdoorsy things, to use his mind, engage in his mind and his hands. … So we thought maybe the Boy Scouts would be good for him and it turns out he likes it (2.02-92:95).
One of the advantages to Boy Scouts, then, is that it gets Christian physically active and outdoors.

Boy Scouts also gives Christian an extracurricular activity like his siblings. Julie shared that joining Scouts was “actually Nick’s idea because the other two [kids] were in so many things, and we felt that [Christian] needed to be in something also” (2.01-144). Boy Scouts provides Christian and Nick opportunities to participate in a variety of activities together, something prompted in part by Jonah’s death. Nick wishes he’d “spent a lot more time” (2.02-61) with Jonah, which motivates him to participate in Boy Scouts with Christian (2.1). Julie reported that Boy Scouts has been Nick and Christian’s “thing” ever since they started attending. She summarizes, “It’s good for him. It keeps him busy” (2.01-144). Participating in Boy Scouts is a practice that displays the culture of support in the King family: It is active involvement in an extracurricular activity that teaches responsibility.

More than getting Christian involved in another activity and physically active, the Boy Scouts of American helps facilitate teaching lessons about responsibility that Nick desires to instill in his children. The Boy Scout oath states:

On my honor I will do my best/ To do my duty to God and my country/ and to obey the Scout Law;/ To help other people at all times;/ To keep myself physically strong,/ mentally awake, and morally straight (Scouts, n.d.).

The Scout Law boys pledge to obey is that a “Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent” (Scouts, n.d.). This oath and law were repeated aloud from memory at the Scout meeting I
attended with Nick and Christian (2.3). Boy Scouts gave Christian an opportunity to develop responsibility.

At a Scout meeting I attended with Nick and Christian (2.3) I witnessed an example of how Scouts reinforces and displays the stepfather-stepson culture of support. The incident involved Christian accomplishing one of the requirements for promotion in Scout rank and a troop ritual. That particular evening, a new Scout was being inducted into the troop. As part of the induction ceremony in Christian’s troop, the new Scout was required to tie a square knot onto a rope attached to the Scout Master’s desk. Before the ceremony was to take place, the scout master asked the new scout if he knew how to tie a square knot. The new scout needed a review. Other boys around him started to remind him how to tie a square knot. From the back of the room where Nick and I were sitting, Nick got Christian’s attention. Nick reminded Christian that one of the skills he needed to accomplish in order to attain the next Boy Scout rank was to teach another person how to tie a square knot. Nick told Christian that teaching the new scout would be an excellent opportunity to check off another requirement. Because the fulfillment of the skill must be witnessed by a fellow Scout of higher rank, the opportunity to teach the new scout was ideal since it occurred in a setting where higher ranking scouts abounded. In this way, Scouts facilitates Nick’s goal of teaching responsibility to Christian. The particular incident also demonstrates Nick’s familiarity with the Scout manual, the guidebook enumerating requirements for achieving rank. Perhaps more significantly, it demonstrates his knowledge of Christian’s progress toward achieving the next rank. The incident displays how Nick supports Christian’s participation and progress through the Boy Scouts.
Participating in Scouts provides opportunities for Christian to be outdoors the same way Nick was as a child. It also gives Christian in an extracurricular activity and teaches, in Nick’s words, “moral values,” and responsibility. Nick takes an active role in supporting Christian’s involvement in Boy Scouts, which is motivated, at least in part, by the experience of burying his 20 year old son Jonah.

**Culture of Support**

The relational culture of support in the King stepfamily system shapes Nick’s role as stepfather, his attitudes toward responsibility, and the specific actions of family chores and Boy Scouts. Nick maintains a “good” relationship with his stepson, much like he had with his father. He seeks to involve Christian in extracurricular activities like his brother and sister. Nick also spends time doing activities with Christian, partly on account of experiencing the death of his son Jonah. In addition to his role as stepfather, the relational culture of support is reflected in Nick’s attitude toward responsibility and the actions which manifest, reinforce, and teach this attitude to Christian.

In the King stepfamily system, there appears to be high congruence between family members’ images of Nick’s role as a stepfather and expectations for responsible behavior. In my interview with Christian, I asked how he knew that “Nick cares about you or supports you or something like that” (2.03-92). He replied by stating, “Well, he’ll usually go places with me, like Scouting stuff, he’ll usually go with me. And then every once in a while we’ll go out to eat” (2.03-93). I probed, “Anything else?” (2.03-96) “[Nick] doesn’t really give us too many chores. Like he’ll give us feed the dogs and clean the house and clean our rooms. Other than that he won’t really make us do all that much” (2.03-97). Christian’s first response hinges on shared time (“he’ll usually go with me”)
and on Nick providing things for Christian. His second response relates to Nick’s expectations for Christian or the responsibilities he’s been assigned. Christian feels these expectations and responsibilities were reasonable. It is telling that Christian mentioned responsibilities in reply to an open-ended question about what is supportive:

Responsibilities were part of the culture of support in the King household. Christian’s views on support were congruent with others in the stepfamily system, especially with Nick’s views. It is equally telling that Christian expanded the question about him to include his siblings (note use of third person) which demonstrates that in Christian’s mind the relational culture of support between he and Nick is shared by the rest of the children in the family. In all, Christian’s response demonstrates that he sees Nick’s role in the stepfamily and views on support as equally applicable to other family members.

Nick also seems to indicate that the images of support are congruent among family members. During my interview with Nick, I asked specifically what it meant to him to be a supportive stepfather. He saw his role as providing financially, but more importantly participating in activities and teaching responsibility to his stepchildren:

And like the financial thing, buying them the things they want and all that. I’m not about all that. … They get pretty much whatever they need, a lot of what they want. But there’s other things that are more important. You know, being at their functions, being at their games, things like that, to me, are more important. Trying to teach them right from wrong and trying to teach them moral values. Those things are more important to me (2.02-211).

Nick’s response, like Christian’s, references all his stepchildren which indicates that at least Nick applied his beliefs about support to the entire stepfamily. Nurturing
involvement and responsibility are clearly what Nick prizes most. The attributed stepfather-stepson relational culture of support has settled into a predictable and shared understanding of roles, attitudes, and behavior among family members.

**The Jacobs Family**

The relational culture of support between stepfather Darren and stepson Brad is geared toward providing Brad the opportunity to replicate Darren’s experiences. This culture of support is characterized by teaching and is profoundly shaped by stepfather Darren’s views on parenting boys, which, in turn, is defined by his own experiences as a boy. Whereas the culture of support is clear at the relational level, at the level of the family system it is more complex. The family culture of support seems to dominated by, not integrated with, Darren’s views and beliefs so that when stepson Brad performs in ways that align with Darren’s views, he receives support from both his stepfather and biological mother; but, when Brad diverges from Darren’s views, he only is supported by his biological mother.

Darren Jacobs grew up in a smallish town located in a mountainous region of the country. He enjoys outdoor recreation, including hiking, camping, backpacking, and hunting. A year ago, the Jacobs family moved to Darren’s hometown. The move also reified Darren’s influence on defining the culture of support in the Jacobs family. He and Karen, his wife, consider it a better place to raise a family than where they had been living. Brad Mason, a 14-year-old, freshmen in high school, is adjusting well to the change. He enjoys being close to his step-grandparents who live across town. Brad is active in his local Boy Scouts of America troop, started wrestling for the high school this
year, and likes going on hikes with Karen, Darren, and his two year old half-brother, Curtis Jacobs. Curtis, the biological offspring of Darren and Karen, was a one-year-old when the family moved. For Karen Jacobs, the move meant transitioning from employment as a police officer to becoming a stay-at-home mother caring for Curtis, a change she thinks she should like more than she actually does. Although Darren grew up in the town and still knows and is known by many of the locals, Karen as a stranger is still working to develop friendships. The Jacob’s family transition back to Darren’s hometown provides an opportunity for Darren to develop a family context similar to what he experienced in his childhood.

**Darren’s Role as Stepfather**

In order to best understand support in the Jacobs family, the role of stepfather requires attention. Darren, in his role as stepfather, assumes a duty to train Brad to be responsible and “manly” in the same way Darren is. Darren writes in the sentence completion exercise, “I want my children to – grow up and have the same life style as I did as a kid” (3.02-SR). During my interview with Brad, he also recognized the aim of Darren’s training. “So he wants me to be like the same way because he wants me to turn out the same way that he did” (3.03-131). Because of Darren’s strong desire for Brad to “turn out the same way he did,” Darren’s experiences as a child and youth are important to understand. Second, because the family moved back to Darren’s hometown only a year before participating in the study, and because Darren started a new job around the same time as the study began, Darren’s new job also impacts his role in Brad’s life.
Early experiences. Darren’s experiences as a child, young adult, and before meeting Karen and Brad, left a lasting impact on his understanding of his role as (step)father. Darren loved his childhood. He explained:

We went camping literally every weekend. … I played baseball in the spring because it didn’t interfere with hunting or camping or backpacking; and even on the weekends I missed games to go camping, which was my choice. And then we just, we backpacked all summer long until hunting season rolled around and then we went down to our camp every weekend hunting. Literally – … We camped, backpacked, and hunted all the time (3.02-11:13).

Darren’s boyhood recreation proved an important training ground where he learned major life lessons from his father. “Dad, he didn’t give us anything. We … had to figure it out” (3.02-60). His father taught Darren and his brothers through experiences. “[Dad] would tell you how to find out the answer but he wouldn’t answer because he wanted us to find out on our own” (3.02-60).

These early experiences resulted in Darren learning to be responsible for himself and others at a young age. He wrote “my father – taught me everything I know, and made me the person I am today” (3.02-SR). He shared several examples of how his father trained him. “Yeah, I was eight. [My Dad and uncle] stuck me in a canoe and shoved me out in the lake and said ‘we’ll come get you later’” (3.02-234). By the time he was 14 years old, his Dad allowed Darren to go backpacking by himself. He was dropped off at a trail head and picked up the next day. He found out “years later” (3.02-235) that, either his Dad or uncle would secretly hike the mountain to check on him during the night.
Nevertheless, at a relatively young age, Darren was entrusted with responsibility to care for himself.

Some of the outdoor trips (camping, backpacking) were Boy Scout sponsored activities. Because his father was the Scout Master, Darren remembered, “we never went anywhere without Dad. And then sometimes I didn’t like it. I wanted to be out away from Dad but then I look back now and I’m glad he was there the whole time” (3.02-217). Darren saw his experiences in BSA as formative, and he achieved the rank of Eagle Scout, the pinnacle of scouting merits.

Darren managed through high school without much problem, but he never desired to go to college. Upon high school graduation, he enlisted with the United States Marine Corp. Darren served four years. After that, the terrorist attack on New York of September 11, 2001 occurred, so he reenlisted and served another four years. In total, he completed tours in Iceland, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Darren stated that stuff “I learned camping with Dad and then through Boy Scouts carried over into the Marine Corp and I credit a lot of what I learned as a kid as to why I’m still here today” (3.02-20). Darren holds closely to the teaching of the USMC: There is no such thing as an ex-Marine (see 3.2). In fact, artifacts of the Marine Corp brotherhood pervade his life. His two younger brothers, who both also became Eagle Scouts, currently serve in the Marines. Darren’s right arm bears a prominent tattoo of rifle bullets with writing in memory of a soldier killed in action. The back windshield of his truck displays the red and gold Marine Corp motto Simper Fidelis (forever faithful). Even though Darren separated from the Marine Corp, his life, including his view of support, is influenced by the experience.
After his time in the Marines, Darren met a lady who was in the Navy, married, and moved to an east coast city with a naval base. His wife had a three year old daughter, so Darren married into stepfatherhood. Subsequently, they had two biological children. After a few years of marriage, Darren’s wife went on a year-long naval deployment. During his wife’s deployment, he was the sole caregiver for all three girls, his stepdaughter as well as his two biological daughters. During that time, Darren went through police academy training and began working as a police officer. Also during the deployment, his wife had an affair. The affair confirmed to Darren that the relationship was over. Darren said the divorce was “pretty much a no brainer” (3.02-105). His relationship with his wife was over, but he thoroughly enjoyed being a dad. He was sad to lose custody of his stepdaughter and two biological daughters. However, during his stint as a cop he met Karen who was also a police officer, got married, and became a stepfather to Brad.

When Darren reflects on his experiences, he concludes “I don’t have any regrets; everything I’ve done in my life has brought me to today’s outcome” (3.02-SR). Darren, then, views his role as stepfather an opportunity to provide Brad with a childhood similar to his own. “I want my children to - grow up and have the same life style as I did as a kid” (3.02-SR). For example, Darren told me about Brad’s initial involvement with the Boy Scouts. “When he was old enough to join, we went and found a troop because I wanted [him] to be in Boy Scouts because I was in Boy Scouts my whole life” (3.02-183). The reasoning that Darren gave for Brad joining Scouts was not that Scouts would be a good opportunity for Brad to develop personally; rather, it would give his stepson an
experience Darren had as a boy and treasured. Darren’s role as stepfather seemed to be significantly influenced by his own childhood experiences.

**Employment.** In addition to Darren’s formative years and early adulthood experiences, a recent change in the family system altered the dynamics of support for the Jacobs family. The same week the family volunteered to participate in the study, Darren got a job with the railroad. Although when Darren and Karen moved back to Darren’s hometown they hoped to find employment with the police department, their hopes were unrealized. After about a year of unemployment and working odd jobs for friends, Darren obtained a job with the railroad. He was hired to become a railroad engineer and began training for that goal. The training involved attending conductor school and becoming a train conductor, the person responsible for all the operation of the train (including the engineer’s job of driving the train). Eventually, after several months of training, Darren would be eligible for a pay raise and promotion to engineer status. Darren thinks it may be the only job he knows of where a person is promoted to do less work and have less responsibility.

The train business pays well but is highly demanding. Darren is required by his work to be on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Of course, there are other regulations that govern his work schedule. For example, if he works 6 days he must have 2 days off. Or he cannot operate a train more than 12 consecutive hours. Nevertheless, the work is constant and demanding. Darren receives a call from his employer and has 10 minutes to respond. If he misses two calls within a year, he loses his job. After responding to the call, typically he will need to be at the train station within two hours. When his employer calls, they tell him when he’ll need to be there. Darren shared a story about one morning
when he was called to work about 1am (after he had gone to bed at 11pm) and was asked to be at the railroad station by 3am. So, Darren got up, got dressed, and drank two cups of caffeinated coffee and a Red Bull energy drink to get roused for a work, only to get another call at 2am saying he was no longer needed. Because of all the caffeine, Darren could not sleep the rest of the night. But, he received a call at 7am to go in as conductor for another train and worked the remainder of that day.

Darren’s employment with the Railroad has been very beneficial for the family. Financially, of course, the steady and reliable income has helped the family. Before acquiring employment, the family cut bills and expenses to a minimum and “lived off of just savings and retirement and help from our parents” (3.01-260). The new income, however, enabled them to obtain a homeowner’s loan. In fact, throughout the duration of my visits, they were looking for a new house and actually put in an offer on one the day of my final observational visit (3.8). I was informed in a follow-up email that their bid was accepted and after some negotiation about the price, they closed on the house. This was made possible by Darren’s employment with the Railroad.

Darren’s job not only changed the family’s economic status, but also affected their relationships. For almost an entire year, neither Darren nor Karen worked steady jobs. This meant that they spent a lot of time together. They both were home when Brad got home from school, for example. Karen welcomed the change brought by Darren’s employment, “I really wanted him to just not be here every single waking moment” (3.01-272). The change has given Karen more one-on-one time with Brad, “so it’s kind of nice because we hang out” (3.01-276). She also thought that because Darren was gone
some of the time, “when he is here, it seems like [he and Brad] get along a little better because, I don’t know, because absence makes the heart grow fonder” (3.01-276).

Brad saw other ways Darren’s work affected their relationship. “Well, he takes me hunting whatever he gets a chance. Because I know he can’t do it a lot because he has to work” (3.03-185). Darren shared two changes resulting from his new job. First, he was less able to do some of the recreational activities he and Brad enjoyed over the summer. “Well since I’ve started this, we haven’t done much, but … we were down at camp a lot this summer-- … floating the river in canoes or we would go hiking” (3.02-247).

Darren’s job and Brad’s school changed their availability. Darren suggested, however, that since their time together would be scarce, it would be more valuable. “Actually we probably will do more stuff together since I’m not home as much. … I’ll be wanting to do it more because I’m not getting to do it as much” (3.02-269). In these ways, Darren’s recent employment change brought about changes in his relationships as well as his family’s financial situation.

Darren’s role as stepfather is hugely influenced by his experiences as a child and by his recent employment with the railroad. Both of these factors influence the relational culture of support between Darren and Brad.

**Masculinity versus Momma’s Boy**

The Jacobs’ family members’ attitudes toward masculinity are particularly important to describe because Darren and Karen hold conflicting perspectives about how to parent Brad, stemming from their different attitudes about masculinity. Darren thinks teenage males shouldn’t be “momma’s boys,” a term which fit Brad in the beginning of their relationship but which is less and less characteristic of him. Karen believes it is
unfair to characterize Brad as a Momma’s boy and that Brad’s actions do not make him a momma’s boy. Their differing views on parenting Brad result in a family culture that fraught with inconsistent expectations for Brad’s behavior, depending on who is present in any given interactive episode.

**Darren’s perspective.** Darren’s views on how boys should act, like many other of his views, can be traced to his own childhood experiences. Darren feels that girls are to be pampered and treated with a higher level of respect than boys. “You do things for girls that you don’t do [for boys]; I mean it’s a nice gesture to open a door for a guy but you are supposed to open one for a girl, is how I was raised” (3.02-85). From Darren’s perspective, boys do not show affection. They do not cry. They do not hug. Boys are very different than girls. Darren used the term “momma’s boy” to describe the antithesis of the kind of person he wanted Brad to be. He shared the following:

> When I was 13, I didn’t want anything to do, I didn’t want to be around Mom because it was Mom but then Brad, that’s all he’s ever know, so it’s a whole different thing. You know what I mean? [Me and my brothers] weren’t Momma’s boys. I was never around Momma’s boys (3.02-58).

A “momma’s boy” was something shameful to Darren. To his chagrin, when he met Brad, he was definitely what he defined as a momma’s boy, “like, [Brad] always wanted to be with his mom” (3.02-165). Although he understood that Brad was always around women” (3.02-171) he felt “by the time you’re a teenage boy, you don’t want to be hugging your Mom and kissing your Mom. … But … even now, he’ll come in and lie on the couch and lay his head on her lap” (3.02-165). Darren thought that, as a teenage boy,
Brad should be outdoors playing instead of spending time with Mom or even showing affection to her.

**Karen’s perspective.** Karen did not believe that labeling Brad as a “momma’s boy” was altogether fair. She thought that Darren’s explanation is a “load of crock” (3.1). She is disappointed in Darren as a stepdad for treating her son Brad the way he does. She explained that Darren “antagonizes” (3.01-175) Brad. And, “Brad is a very sensitive child” whether from his “background or … just his personality” (3.01-175). She elaborated the dynamic, “For whatever reason, [Brad] cries easily, he gets frustrated easily and Darren just picks on him and it’s just unnecessary” (3.01-176). Darren’s antagonism seems to create conflict in this stepfamily because the emerging stepfather-stepson relational culture usurps the culture Karen and Brad established prior to Darren’s arrival in their lives. The cultural change is one that, Karen shared during a phone conversation when the family volunteered for the study “is [3 second pause], it’s um, I mean sometimes its good and sometimes it’s not so good” (see pre-visit fieldnotes).

Karen went on to explain during our interview why she thinks Darren’s expectations for Brad were unreasonable:

I guess every guy that I’ve ever dated or been friends with thinks that Brad’s like completely spoiled and is a momma’s boy and I don’t know. … I mean, I just try to take care of him…. [and] try to be sensitive to his needs. There’s no reason to be a hard ass with a little kid. [We were] all cops so we’re all used to being hard asses a lot of the time, but you don’t have to be like that with a kid just because he’s a boy (3.01-183:185).
Karen believed that simply because Brad was male didn’t preclude sensitivity and compassion, traits which Karen saw in Brad.

**Brad’s perspective.** During my individual interview with Brad, I also discussed the topic of how Brad perceived Darren’s role as his stepfather. Brad recognized that “[Darren] wants me to turn out the same way that he did” (3.03-131). Brad admitted that there were some aspects of Darren’s life that he wanted to emulate and others that he did not:

I’d like to be like him because he’s real muscular, and I’m not really. …Yeah, because he’s pretty outgoing and stuff. … And he doesn’t really back down to anyone because he was in the Marine Corp. But I don’t want to go in the Marine Corp because it’s hard (3.03-145:149).

I asked what type of career Brad thought he would pursue and he said “I just kinda want to go to college, and I don’t really know what I’m gonna go there for. I kinda want to go there for carpentry because it gets a lot of money” (3.03-149). He described that when they lived in on the east coast city with a naval base, he had participated in some woodworking projects with Darren which “really inspired” him (3.03-157). “I’d always want to be making stuff” (3.03-157), Brad exclaimed. So, in many respects Brad wants to become like Darren. He enjoys many of Darren’s favorite outdoor activities – hunting, hiking, fishing, and camping. He admires Darren, and is thankful for Darren’s introducing him to woodworking.

Even though Brad wants to emulate Darren in all these respects, however, there are also domains where he wishes to be autonomous. For example, even though Darren advised against Brad’s participation in the school wrestling team (or any other fall
sports), Brad nevertheless decided to participate. Darren explained that participating in fall or winter sports during the school year would interfere with hunting season. Making a commitment to a team requires after-school training and practices, and Darren felt that this commitment should supersede the desire to go hunting. In the following excerpt, Darren explains what he told Brad during this conversation:

I said “you need to make a decision. … If you go to wrestling, you gotta go to wrestling.” So he wanted to do the wrestling thing but it’s bumming him out that he can’t go hunting. Especially like last night. … We got home at the same time and he’s like “where were you at?” I said “hunting.” He’s like “ah, man!” I said “we talked about this” (3.02-203).

Even though Darren advised against it, Brad made a choice to be involved in wrestling. In many respects Brad is open to Darren’s influence, yet he is still able to act autonomously and make choices that challenge Darren’s authority.

Reconciling viewpoints. Time, rationalization, and deferral seem to be the forces which have reconciled Darren, Karen, and Brad’s disparate viewpoints about appropriate masculine behavior. Darren explained that Brad never had a father or father figure in his life. He said, “It’s always been him and Mom” (3.02-168), a fact that in Darren’s mind sheltered Brad from experiences that might assist “normal” boyhood development.

Therefore, Darren admitted that since their meeting, Brad’s “gotten a lot better actually” (3.02-163). Darren explained, “[Brad has] changed. Like when we first met, he was a super, super momma’s boy and it drove me nuts” (3.02-165). When I asked what had propelled the change Darren told me “I think it’s been the camping and the getting out of the house away from Momma and doing stuff … is what it’s been” (3.02-215). Before
they met, Brad had “never hunted or fished or camped or anything” (3.02-168). Darren reported, “Now that’s his favorite thing to do. He loves doing that kind of stuff” (3.02-168). Darren sees his role as integral in the transformation from Momma’s boy into what he considered a more acceptable adolescent male. Over time Brad’s attitudes and actions converged with Darren’s image of a male teenage boy.

In some ways, Darren has also rationalized his views in order to be more accepting of Brad. Throughout our discussion of the concept of “momma’s boy” Darren hedged his comments with the phrase “it’s way different.” For example, he described:

So it’s just, and like in the morning, [Brad] still comes down and wakes [Karen] up before he goes to school to let her know he’s leaving and all this. To me it’s different because I was never around that before. It was one of those “boys are tough and boys don’t cry” type thing is how we were raised. It’s way different here. It’s way different (3.02-166).

With the phrase “it’s way different here,” Darren seemed to be trying to rationalize or partially accept Brad’s behavior. Later he elaborated his thinking. “I didn’t want to be around Mom because it was Mom but then Brad, that’s all he’s ever known, so it’s a whole different thing.” With phrases like “whole different thing” and “it’s way different,” Darren seemed to be seeking to understand, explain, and partly excuse Brad’s behavior as a Momma’s boy.

The third force for reconciling the different views seems to be deferral. Even though she disliked the way Darren sometimes interacted with Brad, Karen seemed to have little hope that Darren would compromise. Instead, Karen seems to defer to Darren’s view as dominant. She shared, “I guess it’s been a long enough time that if he
were going to, he would have” (3.01-155). Brad also has accepted Darren’s perspective on appropriate masculine behaviors. Karen shared that Brad makes light of the situation:

Now it’s kind of become a running joke because Brad’ll go [to Darren] and be like, “Give me a hug.” And Darren’s like, “Oh, get off me.” So now it’s kind of a joke because I guess Brad’s old enough to understand that it’s not gonna happen.

Darren’s not gonna give you a hug, he’s not gonna say I love you (3.01-157).

Karen and Brad both seem to defer to Darren’s dominant views on appropriate behavior.

One likely explanation for this deferral is that Darren demands greater conformity from Brad than Karen does. When Brad rated his stepfather and mother in terms of conformity orientation, Darren was rated as 37 out of 40. Karen, only 30 out of 40.

Darren and Karen’s perceptions of their own conformity demands matched Brad’s perceptions. Darren rated himself as six points higher than Karen, 36 compared to 30.

Understanding the differing demands for conformity helps explain why Brad and Karen defer to Darren’s views.

**Attitudes in Action**

One interesting way that the differing views held by Darren, Brad, and Karen influenced their interactions with one another was that relating was easier for Brad to interact when he was alone with Darren or alone with Karen. In other words, mother-son interaction and the stepfather-stepson interaction were less tense than stepfather-stepson-mother interactions. Brad wrote, in his sentence completion exercise, that “My father – is fun when my mom isn’t around” (3.03-SR). Karen also recognized this tension. She complained that her efforts to explain the other person’s side were futile, even detrimental, “Whenever I get in the middle … if they’re fighting about something, then
they both turn on me and I’m the bad guy because they always get along when I’m not here” (3.01-176). My observations confirmed this dynamic as well (cf. 3.3; 3.5). When Karen was present there were more conflicts in Darren and Brad’s relationship; however, when Darren and Brad were alone, Darren was much more supportive of Brad, and Brad was much more compliant with Darren’s authority.

One possible explanation is that the time Darren and Brad spend alone is generally spent doing activities Darren considers acceptable. In these situations Darren is “fun” because they are doing an activity Darren is willing to support. However, during one observational visit Darren was supervising Brad while Karen was at the store (3.3). Brad was doing chores as a punishment Karen had given him, so the activity was not something “fun.” Nevertheless, the interactions I witnessed while Karen was not present were, in general, more supportive than when she was present.

Another explanation for the finding that Darren and Brad interact more smoothly when alone than when Karen is present is that because Karen and Darren have incongruent images of Darren’s role or incongruent beliefs what counts as supportive, interactions among the three family members creates friction. That is, the relational culture of support does not smoothly integrate with the family culture of support. In this section I present three events which demonstrate the interplay between relational and family cultures of support. Each example illustrates how supportive (or unsupportive) interactions between Darren and Brad affected how Karen acted; therefore, stepfather-stepson communication was integral in the process of coordinating “attitudes, actions, and identities” (Wood, 1982, p. 76) in the broader family system.
**Dog incident.** The scene took place toward the end of the Christmas recess from school. Darren’s two biological daughters from his first marriage, who live out of state with their mother, were visiting for the week and Brad was out of school. Christmas celebrations were over, and the family was enjoying the last bit of holiday. The evening of my visit the family was all going out to a family friendly restaurant and play place, complete with laser tag and other games. I arrived at the house at 10am and stayed until around 12:45pm. The dog incident occurred around 12pm. My fieldnote excerpt below describes the event:

Brad had let the dog, Fiddler, out to do his business. Unfortunately, after more than a few minutes, Brad’s younger stepsister Jennifer said “Fiddler’s still outside.” She had heard the screen door bang and remembered that Fiddler hadn’t been let back in. Brad immediately got up and went outside. I think he grabbed a brown hoodie [due to the cold]. … Apparently the dog had run away. … After Brad left the room, Karen said “I can’t say anything because I do that all the time.” Darren walked to the door and looked outside. He then went and grabbed keys to the vehicle and left. …

Karen explained to me that it was a shame that Brad was the one to leave the dog out because Darren would be upset with Brad for the mistake. Karen said she frequently let Fiddler go out by himself because she “can’t always take him out.” Plus, it is cold outside and it is annoying to wait in the cold for the dog to do his business.
After talking with Karen for a minute or two, I decided to help find Fiddler. I made a plan to look [for Fiddler] and if I hadn’t found the dog in 5 minutes to return to the house. So, Brad and I were on foot looking for Fiddler. Darren was driving around. I jogged down the block and [inquired about the missing dog] with a couple of people out on the streets.

After a couple of minutes (I had only made it about 4-5 blocks), Darren pulled up in the car and motioned for me to enter. I opened the door and asked if Darren had found Fiddler. He had. Darren drove back to the house and we unloaded. [On the way inside, Darren said “It drives me nuts when they leave Fiddler outside unattended.”] Brad was still out looking [for Fiddler].

After we came into the house, Karen said in a soft voice, maybe to me more than anyone else, “Now I have to go look for Brad.” Jennifer said something about how Brad wasn’t with us or was still looking for Fiddler. Karen explained that Darren hadn’t gone to get Brad because “He’s pissed at Brad.” Karen then said to Darren “give me the keys.” He didn’t say anything, but handed her the keys. She put on a jacket and left in the car.

Jennifer told Darren that “Karen went to look for Brad.” Darren said that Brad probably didn’t know which direction Fiddler had gone, that is why he was still out. Darren had gone downhill. I had gone South, on level ground, and Brad had headed North looking for the dog. Darren didn’t make an excuse for not picking
up Brad, but he had picked me up. Darren said that he had seen me going one direction; presumably that is why he had come to get me and not Brad. … Darren seemed to make it a non-issue that Karen went in the car to find Brad and that he hadn’t done that himself.

…When Brad came back into the house, Karen came first followed by Brad. Brad had the hood of his brown hoodie pulled over his head, obscuring his face. His posture was a bit pulled in and hunched over. His countenance had fallen. I heard him sniff hard and wondered if he had been crying (3.7).

This incident demonstrates some of the “drama” (3.7) of the Jacobs stepfamily system and shows how communication or support between stepfather and stepson created friction as it integrated with the culture of support in the stepfamily system. Brad had done something which was clearly counter to Darren’s wishes. Darren’s reaction to Brad’s forgetting to let Fiddler appeared to be to withdraw support. Whereas Darren’s reaction seemed to ignore Brad, Karen seemed to feel it was her responsibility to find and support Brad, evidenced by her soft-spoken statement “Now I have to go look for Brad” (3.7). In this instance the Darren’s action (or inaction) prompted a reaction from Karen. This interplay between how Darren chose to interact with Brad and how Karen responded to their interaction demonstrates one way the culture of support between Darren and Brad coordinated actions of all family members. It also gives form to the differing views held by Darren and Karen about how to treat Brad.

**Video games.** A second event which portrays how the relational and family cultures interface involved video games. During my interview with Darren, he clearly
expressed his disregard for video games and playing video games. The first time video games were mentioned, Darren contrasted his own childhood with Brad’s, he said, “kids now days and these damn video games” (3.02-24). Later he expanded the same point:

I guess the generation has changed …. When I was a kid, … [Boy Scouts] always sponsored one camping trip a month and we always went backpacking. Well these kids would rather go to the Scout Master’s house and have a sleepover and play video games. That’s not teaching them a damn thing. That’s their weekend outing, yeah and I don’t like that at all. You’re not gonna learn anything. The kids play video games all week. … they need to go do something else (3.02-225:227).

Darren felt that a more diversified education was necessary for “kids now days.” Since kids are exposed to video game play throughout the week, they need to be outdoors, as Darren was, during the weekends. In fact, Darren commented that outdoor experience provides youth the best opportunity to learn valuable life skills.

Darren’s disregard for video games, particularly for Brad playing video games, was not independent from an earlier shared experience. Darren described one of his early experiences playing with Brad:

Karen was doing something and we were only dating a couple of weeks and [Brad and I] were playing a video game. We were playing NASCAR and I beat him and he got pissed and kicked me and I said “I’ll never play a video game with you again if you’re going to act like that” and that’s been four years and I still haven’t played any video game with him (3.02-170).

The teachable moment for Darren was not about video games but about facing the fact that Brad will not win all the time. Darren explained, “It’s just, he doesn’t like to lose at
Darren believed that Brad developed his attitude toward winning and losing as a result of being “the only grandkid and … always around women” (3.02-171). Darren disclosed that when Brad played video games with his mom or grandmother, “they always let him win … and he grew up thinking ‘well I should always win; no matter what I should be the one winning.’ And life is not like that. I told him that a lot” (3.02-171, emphasis added). So the combination of Darren’s reaction to “kids now days” who did not spend enough time outdoors along with the negative experience playing video games with Brad seemed to create a belief that Brad should not be allowed to play video games which manifested in Darren’s active discouragement of Brad’s video game playing.

Brad recognizes Darren’s dislike for video games. Over Thanksgiving, Brad traveled to the Midwest to visit his maternal grandparents. Darren reported that Brad called to tell about the early Christmas presents he was receiving from his grandparents. He excitedly reported about some of the new camping equipment he was given, and concluded the phone conversation with “I got some video games too but I know you don’t care about that!” (3.02-201). The fact that Brad recognized Darren’s dislike for video games illustrates that even their views on video games are incongruent, each at least is aware of the others’ views. That is, Darren’s dislike and Brad’s like for video games is a recognized part of the family’s transacted system of understandings.

During one of my observational visits, the tension between Brad and Darren’s views on video game playing came up in a significant way. My fieldnotes describe the situation:
Karen told me that there had been some debate over whether or not Brad should be allowed to purchase a video gaming system. Apparently Brad has saved his money and gift cards for the past couple of years and purchased an X-box [video game console], which is in his room. ... Darren opined that games are “a waste of money.” He went on, ‘I think kids should be outside, not playing video games inside.’ Karen seemed to share this view to some extent. She mentioned that “we won’t buy [the X-box] for him.” This explained why Brad had to save money and purchase it himself. Karen also said that ‘Darren didn’t think Brad should be able to buy it even with his own money.’ Karen said that she decided to allow Brad to purchase the gaming system but to “monitor the time he spends on it.” She said that she had let him play on it over for several hours when he first bought it “to kind of get it out of his system” and “it was the weekend” anyway.

After completing his homework for the day, Brad asked if he could go play on his X-box. Karen granted permission saying “until dinner time.” Brad got up quickly from the couch where he had been sitting between Karen and Darren. He stepped over their black lab dog which was lying on the floor in front of the couch moving quickly to head upstairs. As Brad rose, Darren reached up and grabbed Brad by the back of his jacket in order to stop him from leaving and said quickly, “it’s dinner time.” The result of this action was that Brad’s motion forward was halted and he tripped over the dog and fell backwards onto the ground immediately in front of the couch. His knees were bent over the dog and his back hit the couch. After Brad fell, Darren somewhat helped him to his feet. There was no apology
and Brad did not say anything to Darren, really. He regained his feet and moved quickly out of the room. Darren’s action, no doubt, was another way of communicating (reinforcing) the message that “video games are a waste of time” and that he didn’t fully condone Brad’s playing X-box. During this incident, Karen didn’t say anything. Neither did I (3.3).

The event described above, in addition to Darren’s comments in our interview, clearly demonstrate Darren’s perspective on video games. Essentially, he does not support Brad playing them, he thinks they are a waste of time, and he believes that Brad should be outside instead of inside playing video games. Karen’s silence, in this instance, may partly have reflected the fact that I was present (reactivity) but may partly illustrate the extent to which Darren’s views are incorporated into a shared family culture. Darren’s disparaging Brad from playing was likely not surprising to Karen. This event illustrated what Karen described in the interview as a time when Darren “antagonizes” Brad (3.01-175). Wrestling and physical interaction was nothing new to the family either. During another visit I witnessed Brad playfully fighting with Darren while Karen was present (3.7).

It is important to note that the antagonism seemed more a part of the family culture of support than it was part of the relational culture of support. For example, I joined Darren and Brad when they were working on a project together. My fieldnotes include several entries about their interactions. For example, I noted “There was a somewhat playful tone and a seemingly good rapport between Darren and Brad. Brad said a few sarcastic comments in jest to Darren, and Darren took it cheerily” (3.5). I also noted that Darren used the term “Bud” during their interactions, which seemed to be a
term of endearment. I summarized my observations by stating, “They acted cordially
toward one another. …Darren definitely took an authority role. [When] Darren told Brad
to do certain things [he] did them, sometimes talking back a little. …The talking back
was usually sarcastic and designed to be a joke” (3.5). From what I observed, Darren was
happy to teach Brad and the interactions were mutually satisfying. This observation was
typical of other times I watched Darren and Brad in one-on-one interactions.

Whereas playing video games was met with discouragement because it did not
align with Darren’s childhood experiences or Darren’s beliefs about how a teenage boy
should behave, outdoor activities were met with Darren’s full support because they were
consistent with his values and beliefs.

Hunting. Perhaps one of the most significant events that occurred during the
study which demonstrated Darren’s providing Brad with his full support was their
hunting trip. The trip was considered a significant event by Brad as well as by Darren and
Karen, not to mention Darren’s parents and likely many of Brad’s friends (3.4). In the
area where the Jacobs live, hunting is an annual ritual. For hunters in the geographic area,
harvesting one’s first deer is a rite of passage. From Brad’s perspective, going on the
hunting trip where he killed his first deer was the most supportive Darren could have
been (3.03-282:284). The event took place over two hours on a Saturday morning.

Darren had been awake for 18 hours when he got off work at 6:30am on Saturday
morning. He shared that he was internally conflicted about going hunting. He was
physically tired, but he knew that particular morning might be the only day Brad could go
out hunting. Darren said he called Brad and said “get your gear ready. When I get home
we’re going out” (3.4). Darren stopped by the house, picked up Brad, and they headed to the location where they hunt.

Describing the hunt, Darren mentioned more than three times that “everything just worked out just right” (3.4). They arrived about 7am, just after daylight. Darren parked the truck in a place a little further away from where he had been parking because he suspected he was spooking deer with the truck. So, they parked a little further away and hiked into their spot. Darren had a pair of binoculars he used to look for deer. He said that he was scanning and saw a deer across a field down in the woods. Because there had been a light snow the night before, the brown deer was visible against the hillside. Darren spotted the deer and described how to find it to Brad. He instructed, “If you get on it, take a shot” and then, boom (3.4)!

Brad hit the deer in the shoulder, although they didn’t know if it had been hit until they hiked over to the spot where the deer had been standing. Brad asked excitedly, “Did I get it?” and Darren wasn’t sure. He reported that he kept hoping that Brad hit the deer. Darren was very excited for Brad. He said, “When we saw blood, it was really encouraging.” Darren and Brad tracked the deer, following the blood trail which was visible on the freshly fallen snow. After a while, they “spooked” the deer, which means they got close enough that they startled the deer out of his resting spot. They followed the trail further and spooked the deer again. When they jumped the deer the second time, Brad took another shot at the deer, this time hitting him in the guts.

Darren shared as an experienced hunter he “knew better” (3.4) than to continue following a dying deer. The “proper” way to track a dying deer is to give it a little time to lie quietly and die. It was Darren’s excitement for Brad that made them eager to find the
deer. But, regaining his wits, Darren decided to buy some time by looking for a lost object. By going back to look for the lost object, Darren bought some time for the deer to find a quiet place to lie down and die. After looking for the object for a while, Darren told Brad, “Let’s go get your deer” (3.4). They then tracked the deer to the place where it died. After finding the deer, they completed the necessary steps to harvest and preserve the meat from the animal. In our interview together, Brad excitedly retold the story, corroborating the facts (3.03-200:227).

This event showed that Darren was fully supportive of Brad going hunting. Even when it was inconvenient for Darren because he was tired and had just finished an all-night work shift, Darren put Brad’s desire to go hunting above his own desire for sleep. Karen was also supportive of Brad’s hunting, although she didn’t want to be personally involved (see 3.5).

The hunting event contrasts with the dog incident and the video game incident and demonstrates the nature of support between Darren and Brad: Darren is extremely supportive of Brad when Brad pursues interests that mirror Darren’s interests. But when Brad pursues his own interests or engages in activities that do not align with Darren’s own experiences, he was neglected or discouraged. The communication of support between stepfather and stepson furthermore contributed to the overarching family culture of support by affecting Karen’s actions. Importantly, the family culture was marked with less stepfather-stepson support than the relational culture that belies the friction prompted in the integration of the two cultures.
Culture of Support

The relational culture of support between Darren and Brad served to shape Darren’s role as stepfather, his attitudes toward “momma’s boys” and the specific actions involving the dog incident, video games, and hunting. Darren sought to encourage Brad to replicate his own boyhood and teenage experiences. Doing so, Darren felt, would guide Brad away from being a momma’s boy and toward a more respectable experience. Darren granted or withheld support as a way of reinforcing his desires for Brad, something demonstrated in the three events described. In these ways, the relational culture of support impacted Darren’s attitudes, actions, and identity as a stepfather.

The family culture of support serves to coordinate the roles, attitudes and expectations, and actions of family members. In the Jacobs family, there is low congruence between members about what role Darren should play and what counts as supportive communication. This incongruence seemed to result in more antagonism when the family interacted together than when Darren and Brad interacted as a dyad. Darren’s support was conditional on behavior that aligned with Darren’s beliefs. So, when Brad behaved in ways that diverged from Darren’s perceptions of “right” behavior, Brad received little or no support from Darren. Instead, Karen communicated support to Brad. This was illustrated in the dog incident by the fact that Karen eventually was the one to find Brad and inform him that Fiddler had been located, and by the fact that Karen ultimately allowed Brad to purchase a video game system. On the contrary, when Brad acted in ways that conformed to Darren’s own experiences, like hunting, Brad was encouraged by both Darren and Karen.
The Fisher Family

Bill Fisher works as a manager for a local business. Ideally work keeps him in the office 9-5, but it often requires him to be “on call” and remotely supervise business projects. Pam works with special needs children as educational support staff in one of the district elementary schools. The stepfather-stepson relational culture of support in this stepfamily system is predicated on a family theme of shared family time and on the belief that Bill should be buddies with stepson Steve and mediate conflicts between Steve and his brother Sam. This culture hinges on role differentiation. Stepfather Bill Fisher seeks to befriend his stepsons, Sam Shorts and Steve Shorts whereas the boys’ mother, Pamela Fisher, is mostly responsible for administering household discipline. Bill still participates in household management, but he defers to the boys’ mother for most matters of discipline. In the Fisher family, the relational culture of support is seen by examining the stepfather role and two activities practiced in the family.

Role of Stepfather

Bill sees his role in Sam and Steve’s lives as a stepdad and friend. I asked Bill how he thought his role in Steve’s life would change in the next several years and he shared, “I want – I certainly hope that it goes beyond the stepdad role. Not necessarily the dad role, but more of the best friend or buddy role. I’d rather be it that way” (4.02-93). Bill currently sees himself as stepdad, but his ideal relationship with his stepson doesn’t progress into a father role but a best friend role. Bill’s concept of his role as a stepfather is impacted by three primary elements.

Father again. The role Bill wants to play in the Fisher family is that of a fun stepdad. However, to become a fun stepdad, he had to adjust his previous ways of
thinking about fathering in order to adapt to his role as husband to Pam and stepfather to Sam and Steve. Prior to meeting Pamela, Bill had been married and fathered two children. Bill succinctly summarized the key events of his 6-year relationship with his first wife. “[My daughter], Connie was born in August of ‘84. … I didn’t get married [to Sue] until … March of ‘86. [My son] Brandon came November of ‘87,… and we filed for divorce in January of ‘90” (4.02-54). Although his marriage ended, Bill and Sue tried to make choices that would be best for their children. Connie lived with her mother.

Brandon lived with Bill. They arranged living and visitation so that the siblings would maximize their time together:

Monday, Wednesday and Friday I’d keep the kids until 6:00. At 6:00, Sue would come and get Connie. Tuesday and Thursday, Sue would get them directly after school and keep them until 6:00 and then I’d get Brandon at 6:00. Friday night, she would take both kids from 6:00 Friday night until 6:00 Saturday night. Then I would get them from Saturday night into Sunday. So that way, we kept the kids together as much as we could (4.02-67).

Bill admitted they tried other arrangements, but the schedule that maximized time for the kids to be together was what worked for them. In part, the fact that Bill and Sue “always lived within five miles of each other” (4.02-69) facilitated their arrangement.

Bill had over 18 years’ experience as a father before even meeting Pamela. He had developed his own parenting style by the time they met. I asked Bill, “What was it like coming into this family with … all your parenting experience that you had, at that point” (4.02-70)? He replied:
It was a shock to me because – I often tease that Brandon graduated high school and I thought, “Thank goodness, I’m done with school, I don’t have to go to anymore PTAs or anymore of that junk.” And what do I do? I hook up with girl and her baby’s going into kindergarten. I have 13 years to go. So that was a little bit of a shock to me and it had been a long time since I had to deal with a five-year-old [and] a twelve-year-old (4.02-71).

Bill went on to explain that the transition was a bit rough at first. He and Pamela had very different parenting styles. He admitted, “I was a little stricter than what I needed to be, and it did cause some conflict at first” (4.02-71). What he wanted to do, even in the early years, was be the “good guy.” However, he felt compelled to “be the bad guy” because he didn’t think the kids were receiving enough instruction or correction from their mother, Pam.

Bill resolved his tension about wanting to be the “good guy” yet feeling like he had to be the “bad guy” when he “finally came around to realize, it’s really not my business to be the bad guy” (4.02-73). This revelation was freeing:

The boys will be all right. And I pretty much, keep my mouth shut. If it doesn’t affect, you know, if it’s not going cause bodily harm or danger to the house, then knock yourself out. Mom’s dealing with this one, not me (4.02-73).

Bill changed his parenting practices (“kept my mouth shut”) and relaxed his expectations for the boys. He was determined to only discipline for instances that would cause imminent danger to person or property. Doing so enabled him to adopt the role of “good guy” with his stepsons which he had desired since the inception of their relationship.
Adjusting his parenting practices and expectations was instrumental in creating a relational culture of support in which Bill could have fun with Steve. Although in the ideal, Bill thought it was important for him to be the “good guy” and also saw value in stepping back from the role of disciplinarian, I observed numerous instances where Bill instructed Steve and suggested correct behavior, even if he did ultimately defer to Pamela as the disciplinarian.

Another important aspect in understanding Bill’s role in the stepfamily system is to recognize that Bill sees Steve as his own. Bill stated, “I have four kids. In my mind, I have four children” (4.02-26). Even when people push him for more information, he shared, “I will say, there are two of hers and two of mine, but I still have four kids. And that’s the way I look at it” (4.02-20). Pam assessed Bill’s commitment to her and the kids. “Bill has been great. … He’s always been really positive … and accepting of the kids” (4.01-169). She shared the example, that even when Alan, the boys’ biological dad, was “being mean,” Bill said, “you know, I’ll take them. I’ll adopt them, if he doesn’t want them” (4.01-169). Recognizing that Bill views his stepchildren as his own is an important part of his role in the stepfamily.

**Interactions with Sam.** Sam, Steve’s older brother, also plays a crucial role in shaping what Steve counts as stepfather support. To clarify Bill’s role as stepfather it is necessary to understand some of the behavioral challenges Sam provides for this stepfamily. Sam has Aspergers syndrome and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). He was diagnosed as a child with these “issues,” the term the family uses to refer to the diagnoses. Often Sam will erupt with name calling and expletives, Steve informed me (4.03-48). Although functional, Sam’s development and maturity, according to Pamela,
stopped about at a sixth grade level. The prominence of Sam’s “issues” in defining the family patterns cannot be overstated.

I witnessed a few examples of how Sam’s issues affected the family. For instance, during my last visit I joined the family, along with Pam’s mother, for dinner (4.8). We were sitting in the kitchen around a granite covered island that doubled as a table. Pam was busily preparing the meal. As she served the first course, a salad, she commented “we could have eaten dinner at the dining room table” (4.8). The dining room, adjacent to the kitchen, was always furnished with fine dishes – plates, napkins, drinking glasses, flatware. I had never seen the family use the table or even any indication it had been used, so I was surprised. Pam’s mother said something like “yeah, right” (4.8)! Pam must have seen the confused look on my face because she explained that keeping the dining room perfectly arranged is one of Sam’s OCD issues. She said it wouldn’t work to eat there because she “didn’t make reservations” (4.8). In this instance, Sam’s OCD prevented the family from using the dining room table to eat a meal together. The family seemed to accommodate the issue by not using the dining room at all. Instead, we sat to eat in the chairs that lined their kitchen island.

I also witnessed a couple of the “fights” that occurred between Sam and Steve. When I first began visiting the family, Sam was on his best behavior. But on my fifth visit I witnessed a fight between the boys. This was the first of three fights I was present to observe. Just prior to the skirmish, I was sitting with Bill and Pamela at the island in the kitchen. Pam’s mother was at the house in another room and Sam and Steve were upstairs. My fieldnotes describe the scene:
Bill asked Pam “how were the boys today?” The boys were upstairs and it was just the three of us in the kitchen. [Because I was sitting there] I was surprised by the openness of Pamela’s answer. She went into a long description of how they had behaved and the problems they were having together. Bill commented that when he had Steve alone over the weekend, he was great. It seemed like they said in unison, “yeah, because they were apart from each other.” Just after this conversation, the boys started arguing upstairs. The grandmother went to check on them. As she did, [loud voices upstairs] … escalated to a yelling argument. After another couple of moments, there was noise of rustling around. Bill announced “now they’re fighting.” He went upstairs and stopped the fight. I didn’t hear Bill raise his voice, but the fighting stopped. When he returned to the room, he said “Steve had Sam in a headlock.” I was surprised that the younger brother (10 year old Steve) would physically dominate his older brother (16 year old Sam). When I asked about this, they told me that Steve is pretty forceful when Sam aggravates him (4.5).

According to Bill and Pam, arguments like the one I witnessed occurred almost every day. Although there is a social norm in the United States for fraternal conflict, the number of arguments and fights in the Fisher family seem to be exacerbated because of Sam’s mental health problems.

Regarding the culture of support, I asked Steve to share a time he really appreciated Bill’s involvement in his life. Steve shared that he likes having Bill around when his brother is acting out, “He taunts me and sometimes it gets physical. And, we hit each other. He taunts me and uses swear words” (4.03-48). I replied, “That really bothers
you. Yeah? So, what does Bill do” (4.03-49)? Steve said that Bill “helps” him or “sends [Sam] up to his room” (4.03-50). In addition to having fun, then, Steve perceives Bill as supportive when he mediates conflicts involving his brother Sam.

Interactions with Alan. Pamela’s ex-husband, Alan, also impacts the role Bill plays in the stepfamily system. First, Alan influences how Bill is perceived. Pamela felt that Alan was a poor husband and father. Alan was unmotivated to “do things as a couple” and he “never wanted to do things as a family” (4.01-65). At the same time, “he didn’t want the boys and I to go [like a] family or do anything [together]” (4.01-65). Pamela reported that Alan felt that his responsibility as a husband and father was to bring home a paycheck – nothing more. Alan worked as a highway truck driver and was away throughout the week and home on the weekends. Pam thought Alan was a self-absorbed father. She said, “He never really spent quality time with Sam and Steve. And when he was there, he wanted to sleep or do what he wanted to do, and [then he was] gone again” (4.01-91). This experience with her previous husband and father of her children color the way she views Bill’s fulfillment of those same roles. In her sentence completion exercise, Pam wrote “My current spouse – is extremely supportive of myself and my child” (4.01-SR). Similarly, in an open-ended item on the questionnaire where Pam was asked to describe Bill’s relationship with Steve, she concluded with “their overall relationship is far better than with his biological father” (4.01-SR). Alan’s behavior created a reference point against which Pam measured Bill.

Pam also articulated ways that Steve compared Bill to Alan. Pam shared that she sees Steve, “within the last six months” recognizing Bill’s role vis-à-vis Alan’s role (4.01-100). He “has been a little more apt to say … Bill helps him with stuff; Bill’s there
for him, where before he just felt like he had to have this undying loyalty to his dad. But I see that shifting” (4.01-203). The fact that Pam uses the idea of shifting loyalty belies the comparison being made between Bill and Alan.

Alan’s role in the stepfamily system is not only a passive reference point but also an active influence on the amount of time the boys spend with him. The custody agreement is set up so that Pam has physical custody and Alan has weekend and one meal visitation per week. Alan only takes the kids some weekends and has never used the meal visitation to see the boys. Pam continued, “We try to split the holidays” (4.01-99). Pam claims that Alan doesn’t care whether he sees the boys or not, but rather he uses his visitation to try and influence their decisions. Pam tries to be a neutral party in honoring the visitation schedule. She announced:

I always leave it up to the kids. It’s their choice if they want to go or not. I don’t tell them they can’t. I don’t tell them they have to. … I [say], you need to have a relationship with your dad, and how you feel about your dad should be based upon the relationship the two of you have, nothing I say or do (4.01-102:103).

And, as Steve matures and forms his own opinions about Alan and the way he treats his mother, Steve’s role in the family decision making becomes more prominent. In his responses to the leisure scale, Steve marked that talking on the phone or in person with dad was “somewhat not enjoyable,” even though it only occurred once a week (4.03-SR). Talking in person with his stepdad, which occurred every day, was “somewhat enjoyable,” the same rating he gave to talking in person with his mom (4.03-SR).

An instance that occurred during my visits illustrates the interplay between the roles enacted by Alan and Steve. Bill articulated the following story:
Last weekend Pamela and Sam were going [on a special trip]. I was supposed to go along. Steve was supposed to go to his dad’s because that’s just too much of a bus trip and too much walking for him. His dad wouldn’t take him. And Pam called and said, “I’ve planned this trip for Sam. Steve can’t get –.” “Well, I’ve got shopping to do, I’m not taking him.” Okay, well Steve and I stayed home. And we did our thing around here, and there, and everywhere. This past weekend, “When are you going to your dad’s?” “Nope. He didn’t want me last weekend; I don’t want him this weekend.” So Steve has his own ways of getting back (4.02-93).

Pam and Bill allow Steve to make decisions about when he goes to his biological father’s house. Because Alan “ditched” Steve one weekend, Steve “ditched” his dad the following weekend (4.01-105). I learned that Steve did not go back to his father’s home for at least two weeks (4.01-105). Alan’s choices impacted the amount of time the boys spent with him. Coincidently, as Steve spent less time with Alan, they spent more time with Bill.

Alan’s role in the family is an important influence on the culture of support because it provided a standard against which to compare and contrast Bill’s role in the family. It also is important because it impacted the amount of time that Bill spent with Sam and Steve. It could be every weekend that they kids are away, but in reality they only visit their nonresident father about twice a month. Alan’s role also amplified Steve’s role as decision maker, mostly because Pam encouraged Steve to make decisions about the amount of time he spends with Alan.

The culture of support between Steve and Bill involves all three of the influences described. Bill’s original perspective on parenting came from his early experiences with his biological children, Connie and Brandon. Upon forming as a family, Bill was required
to adjust his understanding of fathering behavior. These adjustments were largely influenced by Sam’s issues as well as the boys’ relationship with their nonresident biological father Alan. One of the things that Steve considers supportive is when Bill intervenes in his and Sam’s arguments. Steve also compares Bill’s actions against those of his biological father. The culture of support in the family helps to coordinate Bill’s role in the family.

**Relational and Family Actions**

The relational culture of support in the Fisher stepfamily also helps coordinate relational and family activities. Two particular rituals help bring into focus the culture of support relationally between Bill and Steve and in the context of the family system.

**Asking how day went.** One of the rituals I observed was Bill checking-in with Steve. The majority of my visits with this family occurred on weeknights around 5pm, which was around the time that Bill returned to the house from work. This gave me the opportunity to see some of Bill’s first interactions upon reuniting with the family after a full day’s work. Almost every visit, I saw Bill ask Steve about his day. Typical of other instances, the following excerpt from my fieldnotes describes one of these interactions:

While Pam was upstairs changing from her work clothes, Bill came to ask Steve how his day had been. When Steve said he hadn’t learned anything, Bill asked ‘why do we send you to school anyway?’ Steve responded ‘I don’t want to get smarter.’ During this brief exchange Bill stood across the island while Steve sat in the same chair where he was playing with G.I. Joes figures. Bill smiled and spoke in a soft tone toward Steve. … Steve mostly looked down at his toys during the exchange. Bill had a steady gaze toward Steve while he asked questions. Steve
spoke very quietly, but it was about the same volume he used the entire time I was present (4.2).

Although the exchange was short, the significance of this particular ritual in demonstrating the culture of support is its consistency. Bill expressed a continued concern for Steve, his activities, interests, and events. Steve never really shared much during the exchanges I witnessed (perhaps because I was there), but Bill continued to ask.

**Bowling.** A second event which demonstrated the culture of support between Bill and Steve was a bowling outing the Fishers took. During the very first visit I had with the family (4.1), Bill mentioned that they had very recently been talking about going bowling. Because I was visiting in the winter, many of the family’s activities were prevented. They explained they are a seasonal family, and that some of the activities they enjoy – grilling out on the deck, swimming, hot tubing, camping in their fifth wheel – are curtailed in the winter due to weather. Bowling is something they brainstormed, and it is something Steve had never experienced except on the Nintendo video game, Wii Sports. The first outing occurred while I was still visiting the family, so I went along. The event, initiated by Bill and Pam, seemed significant as an opportunity to teach Steve something entirely new to him and to do something Steve might enjoy. My fieldnotes describe the scene (see Figure 4.1):
We arrived to the bowling alley around one o’clock on a Sunday afternoon. The alley was almost entirely empty. We got set up on one lane. I opted not to bowl due to a hip injury, so I positioned myself with Steve’s grandmother (Pam’s mom) who had come to witness the event as well. I sat in a chair near the lane where I could see and hear the following event unfold:

Pam went with Steve to pick out bowling balls to use. Bill changed into his bowling shoes and then went separately to pick out his ball. They returned to the lane and Pam entered their names into the computerized scoreboard: Steve, Pam, Bill. It struck me as odd that she entered Steve first since he had never even entered a bowling alley before this event. I also was a bit surprised the family didn’t warm up by rolling a few practice balls before keeping score. Even though it was a new skill for Steve to acquire, neither Bill nor Pam modeled how to bowl by going first. Instead, Pam walked him through the motions of how to bowl. Mostly Steve bowled gutter balls. His score the first game was 19, a fact which he found very discouraging (4.6).
I asked Steve if bowling was what he expected. He told me “it’s a lot harder” (4.6). Later in my interview with Steve he told me, “It was fun. A little aggravating too. Whenever I got some pins it was fun but whenever it went into the gutter I really didn’t like it” (4.03-28). Since his point of reference was playing the Wii video game, the physical demands of rolling a heavy ball down a 60 foot lane was surprising to Steve.

Both Pam and Bill tried to encourage Steve, albeit differently (see 4.6). The both said things like “Don’t get upset with yourself. Enjoy it.” They also communicated repeatedly that there was no pressure and no expectations for success. “You’re going to get better’ ‘no one starts out good.” Bill reassured, “No one is looking at you. There’s no one here to impress. It’s just us, Steve-o.” Where they differed was in how they portrayed the future of Steve’s bowling career. Bill commented to Steve, “We’re going to have to stick with the Wii, aren’t we.” Pamela told Steve “you’re going to get so good, we’re going to have to buy you own ball, we’re going to have to get you gloves and shoes.”

Related to the culture of support, Bill’s encouragement was collective in nature (i.e., “we” focused), whereas Pam’s encouragement was focused on Steve (i.e., “you” focused). Pam’s encouragement to Steve was focused on what he could accomplish on his own. She envisioned her role as purchasing the accouterments of professional bowler, envisioning a positive future for Steve. The other-ness of her discourse permeated her encouragement. Bill, on the other hand, tried to create a common identity with Steve through his use of “we” language. He looked on the uncertain future and encouraged Steve to return to what he knew, and to return in safe company with Bill. At another point in the bowling excursion, Bill also put Steve and himself in the same category with Pam in another category because Pam’s bowling score was substantially better than either
Steve’s or Bill’s. Through the use of “we” language, Bill vied for a common identity with Steve.

Separate from the bowling incident, I heard about other instances where Bill and Steve were part of an in-group and Pamela was part of an out-group. For example, last summer Bill and Steve played a prank on Pam. In the following excerpt, Bill shares the story:

Steve likes to think he’s pulling a joke on anybody or everybody. One time for instance, I got home from work in the afternoon and Pam wasn’t home yet. I said, “Hey, we’re going to play a trick on mom.” He said, “What?” I took a bear bottle and I rinsed it out and I filled it with Kool-Aid and then I screwed the cap back on, and I showed him, I put it in the refrigerator and I said, “Now this one down here is yours, this one up here is mine.” I said, “When we come home –” I said, “After mom comes home, we’re going to be outside and I’m going to ask you to in and get a beer.” I said, “You bring them both out and then just sit down and crack the top on yours and see what she does.” Oh, that was hilarious. I mean, he did it just perfect too. She came home and we’re sitting on the deck, it was in the summer time. I said, “Oh Steve, I could really drink the daylights out of a beer if you’d get one.” “All right,” he says. So he gets up and comes back out and hands me my beer. He’s got two in his hand and Pam’s just thinking, “Oh he just doesn’t want to make another trip later.” So he sits mine down there and I crack the top on mine. He sits down and cracks the top on his. If he wouldn’t have chugged all in one suck, … I think it really would have gotten a lot better. But it did kind of get Pamela excited a little bit and he almost pee’d himself laughing. He just thought
that was the best thing in the world. So he loves a good practical joke like that (4.02-151).

The point Bill was making was that Steve likes to play pranks on other people. On another level, however, the story illustrates a time when Bill created a coalition involving he and Steve as part of the in-group and Steve’s mom in an out-group. This practice is the same as what Bill did when the trio went bowling. Creating a shared sense of identity or a coalition was a tactic Bill used to build a friendship with Steve and also allowed him to reinforce his desired role as “good-guy.”

**Culture of Support**

The relational culture of support between Bill and Steve defined and was defined by Bill’s role as stepfather and the activities the pair does together and as a family. Bill’s role as stepfather was influenced by his past experience as father as well as dynamics of the stepfamily system which were impacted by Sam’s mental health as well as Alan’s influence. In the early years of their family formation, Bill felt he was overly involved in disciplining Steve, something he’s tried to limit more recently. From my observations, Bill still actively corrects Steve, but also tries to support him in a variety of ways. Bill seeks to befriend Steve and to advocate for him with Sam. He also practices a weekday ritual to check-in with Steve. Further, Bill uses inclusive language to attempt a sense of shared identity between Steve and himself. These practices form a relational culture between Bill and Steve that help facilitate Bill’s desire to be the “good guy.”

At the level of the family system, different family members held different images of Bill and his role as a support. Although Bill saw himself as being more like the “good guy,” Steve thought he was bossy sometimes. At the family level, it seemed to me that
the way the Fishers integrated the relational with the systems level was by allowing multiple relational cultures to coexist without influencing one another. In other words, the relational culture of support between Bill and Steve did not seem to impact the mother-son culture of support. This was demonstrated most clearly in the bowling incident where Bill and Pamela both offered support to Steve in very different ways. Neither contradicted the other, but nor did they seemed to influence each other. In this way, the relational culture of support seemed to function parallel with other relational cultures, never fully integrating into a family culture of support. Perhaps it was that Bill’s beliefs were never integrated with other members’ beliefs. They were never shared.

The Weliver Family

The Weliver family respects the autonomy of its members and expects from everyone responsibility, self-management, and honesty. Stepfather Karl Weliver works as a maintenance supervisor and program coordinator for a popular production venue. His job requires his presence on site many evenings of the month, but as a supervisor he has some flexibility to join his family for dinner. Karl is married to Kara Weliver, his third wife. They have been together for 3 years. She works 8-5 as administrative assistant for a non-profit center. Ten-year-old Evan Brown is Kara’s only biological son. He enjoys playing with a variety of toys, working on projects, and playing video games. Evan busses to and from a nearby elementary school. Fred Weliver, 17, also lives with the family. A junior in high school, Fred is Karl’s biological son by his first marriage and, like his father, is interested in auto mechanics. Kim Weliver, Karl’s biological daughter by his first marriage, lives and attends college in a city about an hour’s drive from the
family household. Karl also has an 11 year old son by his second marriage who he sees very infrequently, only about two or three times per year.

The relational culture of support in the Weliver family is one where Karl has fun with Evan and involves him in as many projects as possible. Karl’s role as stepfather fits into the interactive pattern of the family by bringing a lively sense of humor and fun to the household. Both Karl and Kara recognized this pattern. Completing their questionnaires separately, they responded to the prompt “When father comes home” very similarly demonstrating a high congruence in their image of Karl as stepfather. Kara said, “When father comes home – he lightens the mood” (5.01-SR). Karl wrote “When father comes home – it’s time to have fun” (5.02-SR). This interaction pattern characterized Karl and Evan’s relationship; they had fun together. Karl also teaches Evan, through participation, how to tinker.

**Role of the Stepfather**

Karl has an outgoing personality. He smiles nearly constantly and stays upbeat when circumstances are not ideal. Two aspects of Karl’s life are prominent in defining the culture of support in this family. First, Karl’s demanding work schedule is something that influences how often and how much he can spend time with Evan. A second, equally prominent, aspect of his life is his background as a “tinkerer.” This experience not only has figured into his work life but also plays out in his home life and the activities he shares with Evan. Both of these dimensions are discussed following a brief description of how Karl, Kara, and Evan define the stepfather identity.

**What is a stepfather?** For the Welivers, a stepfather is part of a whole. He is necessary but not sufficient in creating a stepfamily. Kara shares that before they
blended, she, Karl, and the kids, Evan, Fred, and Kim, sat down together to discuss the commitment they were all making to one another:

It wasn’t just me, and it wasn’t just Karl. It was okay, guys, this is going to be a family if everyone agrees to do it, but you have to be committed to doing it because it’s not temporary. We’re going to still be here 10 years from now; we’re going to still be here 20 years from now. This is where [separation] stops. Right here is how we do it. Do you all want to do it? And everyone said yes (5.01-141).

Since that time, their mutual commitment to one another is integral to keeping the family functioning. Partly because of his personality, Kara thinks Karl is “the glue” that holds the family together “because he’s very easygoing. He can handle things when it gets rough. … He’s the joke in a bad situation. He’s the lighten-the-mood person” ” (5.01-143). His presence is part of what makes the Weliver family what it is.

Evan also expressed the importance of commitment. During my interview with him, I asked “What do you think an ideal stepdad is like” (5.03-57)? Evan began sharing different aspects of a stepfather that might be part of an ideal stepfather. “I don’t even care what the guy looks like. It’s just what’s his personality. Is he nice to children? Has he had wives in the past? Has he had children, like simple details like that basically” (5.03-58). Not quite understanding what he thought was ideal, I probed. “What would be ideal? Would he have had children in the past? Wives” (5.03-59). Evan struggled to articulate his thoughts for a moment, “Yeah. Like, well I have no idea how to put it, it’s just I think that an ideal stepfather would be basically anything [another] kid would want it to be. He’s rich and powerful and good looking all that such” (5.03-60). Evan was speaking of what he thought might be ideal for others, but he then personalized the
question, and from his 10-year-old perspective shared what was most important to him.

“But to me, I don’t care if the guy is rich or poor, homeless or not. I just care if I have a dad or not” (5.03-60). Of course, Evan has a dad. His nonresident father even calls daily to talk and Evan visits him every other weekend. But, to Evan, the presence of Karl in his life was hugely important. “I just care if I have a dad or not” (5.03-60). Karl’s presence and involvement in his life made him an ideal stepfather for Evan.

Later I asked what Evan would change about his relationship with Karl. “Nothing” (5.03-74), he replied. I asked the same question about his dad. Evan indicated he would appreciate less involvement. “For my relationship, for my dad, I think he should call me three times every week instead of like every single day. Because, he always asks for me at times right when I have dinner” (5.03-76). The inconvenience of an interrupted dinner, to Evan, was reason enough to somewhat limit his father’s involvement.

From Karl’s perspective, the stepfathering role is analogous to the fathering role, but it is contextualized by the role of husband. He said, “I never look at it as being a stepdad, I always look at it just being Dad” (5.02-196). Karl said he loved kids and was grateful to go through the experience of fathering a 10 year old again, “The feeling you get to watch those kids grow up and the things you get to redo. You get to live your childhood too” (5.02-198). Karl believes that stepfathering, however, starts with demonstrating a “safe” relationship with the child’s mother. Displaying a positive martial relationship lets the stepchild know “Okay, it’s safe to let this guy in” (5.02-380). Once the bridge of trust is established in this way, Karl thinks the next step is “getting down to hanging out with him and doing things. Taking him to … a park, spending time alone
with him, take him out and find out what his favorite thing is” (5.02-380). In the following excerpt, Karl shares how his relationship progressed:

With Evan it was, “What do you like to do?” And “How do you like to have fun?” and “Let’s meet your friends” and each time you’ll get more and more from the kid. Showing them that you care and showing them that you can be a good stepdad to them is probably important. But I think the first step is, like I said, with Mom and Dad. If he doesn’t feel fear that Mom’s gonna be in danger or hurt he’ll let his guard down a little bit (5.02-381).

In this way, the stepfathering role begins with the marital relationship and then extends progressively into the stepfather-stepson dyad. Stepfathering is one part of the whole stepfamily.

**Early tinkering experiences.** Experiences from Karl’s childhood and youth also impacted his role as stepfather. One of the most important dimensions of Karl’s life is his background as a “person that would tinker” (5.02-228). He reported that he always wanted to know how things worked, and he has never been afraid to experiment. He shared a story that he once tried to charge a car battery by hooking it to an electric socket. It didn’t charge the battery, but he burned the back of his eye socket! Karl had a number of “close calls” as a boy and youth, but through it all he learned a great deal about how things work. He also trained as an automobile mechanic to further his knowledge, and he served in the local fire company from the time he was 16 until he was 38 years old.

His experiences as auto mechanic, fire company volunteer, and general tinkerer characterize his work and home life. His knowledge and experience helped him obtain his current job as one of three maintenance foremen at a local venue which hosts over 300
shows per year. He supervises a number of employees to make sure events are set up correctly and that they run smoothly. Karl’s varied experiences also helped him gain responsibility for upkeep of the lawns and grounds in the 20 unit townhome property where the Welivers live. When it snows, they shovel and ice the walks. And, in the summer, they are charged with maintaining the lawns. Fred, Karl’s biological son, helps with these responsibilities. Karl also involves Evan as much as he can, like “any time that we’re working outside I try to get him involved. … I try to teach [Evan] everything I’m doing so he can tinker later in life” (5.02-35). Karl’s boyhood pastime affects his current occupation as well as what he teaches Evan.

Work schedule. Another dominant influence on Karl’s role as stepfather is his work responsibilities. Karl has three jobs and a variable schedule. His work requires him to be away many evenings of the month, because the venue where he works mostly hosts evening events.

There are a number of perks Karl sees to his work. One advantage Karl sees is that working there he sometimes gets free tickets which he gives to his family. He may be working, but they will be at the event together. Karl explained that sometimes Evan will “call me on the phone, ‘I don’t see you anywhere on the concourse, are you working? Why don’t you come up here’” (5.02-148). Sometimes, then, they are able to enjoy the concerts or sporting events that occur in the venue. Another benefit to his tenure and rank at the venue is that Karl is often able to leave the premises during his “lunch” break in order to eat dinner at the house with his family. Also, when Kara “works [during the day] and [Evan’s] off I’m normally here with him” (5.02-160). Because of the popularity of the local venue and Karl’s position, he was able to arrange a tour for Evan’s Cub Scout
pack. Karl persuaded the venue to provide merchandise with the logo of the venue for each Cub Scout, “Those kids were just ecstatic and of course Evan felt good because he was the top guy on the totem pole because, ‘Dad did this’” (5.02-164). Perks of working at the venue have impacted the role he plays in Evan’s life, particularly how he can spend time with him.

**Discipline.** Important also in understanding Karl’s role as stepfather is to understand the way Kara and Karl have divided the task of disciplining the children. In their house, major decisions are made by the biological parents. Karl shared, “I’ll discipline Evan as far as sit on the couch and go to your room or something but if I feel that he’s not going to listen, … I’ll let Kara” (5.02-83:85). Karl continued, “She does the same with Fred” (5.02-83:85). The system was established around the beginning of the stepfamily and is adhered to by all four parents involved in Evan’s life. Karl clarifies, “If it’s something that has to be made immediately yeah, I would make it and we understand that but, … we do our parenting here and we don’t interfere with his parenting there either” (5.02-93). This system frees the stepparents from being responsible for major decisions. When I asked about what constituted a “major” decision, Karl indicated that it was almost exclusively related to medical decisions and issues related to education. So at least in those domains, the biological parents cooperate to reach a consensus on what’s best for Evan, because, Karl reasons, “that’s ultimately their kid” (5.02-87). Getting at the essence of his relationship with Evan, Karl reports, “Me and him are friends” (5.02-96). Recognizing this parenting dynamic helps clarify Karl’s role as a stepfather.
**Actions**

Two activities also reflect the culture of support between Karl and Evan. Both show how Karl sought to connect with Evan through one-on-one activities.

**Woodworking.** One activity that seems important to Karl and Evan family is woodworking. In his sentence completion exercise, Even wrote “My stepdad and I – like to build” (5.03-SR). This activity accords with Karl’s desire to teach Even “everything I’m doing” (5.02-35). Woodworking provides Karl and Evan time together working on a shared activity, gives Karl the opportunity to teach Evan, and also demonstrates the culture of support. One event in particular pictured literal and symbolic support in Karl and Evan’s relationship.

The scene took place in the basement of the Weliver house where Evan and Karl recently constructed a wood working bench. Just a week before this particular visit, I had been downstairs with Karl and heard about the plans to clean it up and put in the workbench. The evening of my observation, it was completed. I joined Karl and Evan downstairs. Karl asked if Evan wanted to make something, and Evan agreed enthusiastically. I learned that they had been talking about making the bird house for a couple of weeks, so that is what they decided to build. I stood near the bench and maneuvered around it to be able to get the best view of what was happening. My fieldnotes described the action:
As Karl got out a piece of 1x4 from the lumber pile on the bottom of the workbench, I asked if they would use any drawings or plans. Karl replied ‘no, we’ll just wing it’. Karl nudged a small stool which had been under the bench toward Evan. ‘Here you go, Evan.’ [see Figure 4.2]. Karl looked at Evan and asked, ‘are you all ready now?’ Evan glanced around the workbench, thought a moment, and said ‘No, I don’t have safety glasses. Where are they?’ Karl indicated the back of the workbench and grabbed them for Evan. Evan put them on his face as Karl did the same. Now they were ready.

![Figure 4.2. Evan’s stool at the workbench.](image)

Karl took the board and measured for the first cut. He asked, ‘how long do we want to make it?’ ‘How about 10 inches.’ He held the tape measure and had Evan mark 10 inches, ‘Is this right?’ Evan asked seeking Karl’s okay before marking. As Evan marked both sides of the measuring tape, Karl said ‘good job, you remembered to mark both sides.’ ‘Now let’s draw a line through it.’ He got out a level and held it steady in place. Evan marked along the straight edge. Then Karl set up the chop saw and locked the board in place. He asked “do you know why
we’re doing this?” indicating the clamp he used to lock the board in place. “We keep it from moving,” Evan answered. After getting the cut set up, Karl held the edge of the saw and Evan grabbed and pulled the trigger. They made the cut together.

This occurred three times, with almost all the cuts. It also happened when they drilled. Karl placed his hands over Evan’s. Karl set up each cut or drill and then had Evan help by pulling the trigger (see Figure 4.3). They drilled pilot holes with the drill and then Evan nailed the boards together. Karl selected the materials and was the mastermind behind the design. He explained what they were doing the entire time that they worked.

Moreover, Karl emphasized safety throughout. While they were using the chop saw once, Karl stated ‘remember you can’t play around down here when I’m not here.’ For the first couple of cuts on the saw, Karl asked Evan, “you ready?
Glasses down?” These statements, and the entire experience, demonstrated ways that Karl was teaching (socializing) what was “proper” woodworking, or “tinkering,” as I’m sure Karl would call it.

When they finished making the bird house, Karl congratulated Evan for the “first bird house you made.” Evan quickly responded “that we built. It’s not entirely mine.” Then Karl said “are we done yet?” Evan didn’t ignore him but never responded. Evan became engrossed in marking up the newly minted birdhouse.

As Karl put away a tool, he asked, “what’s the cub scout motto?” “Do your best!” Evan responded. Karl continued putting away tools and cleaning up. He told me that he’s learned from working with Cub Scouts that “no matter how bad you mess up, they always have fun doing it” (5.4).

This event demonstrates several aspects of the stepfather-stepson culture of support. Specifically, the incident shows that Karl supports Evan by involving him. Karl was teaching Evan. He talked through each decision and action needed to construct the bird house. He referenced their past experiences together, sometimes saying things like “remember the one birdhouse we saw” (5.4). He literally supported Evan’s hands so that he could make the required cuts. Karl enabled Evan to participate.

Karl also responded to Evan’s ideas. Evan gave input; it wasn’t fully Karl’s project. For example, Evan requested to make a bigger hole for the birds because he thought the hole that he and Karl originally drilled was too small (see 5.4). Upon Evan’s suggestion, Karl got out the biggest drill bit that was in the set they had used to construct the bird house (see Figure 4.4). However, it still seemed too small to Evan. Karl could
have said “that’s all the drill bits we have out,” but instead he went to a storage container and found another set of drill bits. Evan selected one which he thought would be a good size. Using the bit, however, required that Karl mount a vice grip onto the workbench, a task that added about 15 minutes of tangential work to the project. He did this without complaint. After the vice was in place, they then began drilling the hole. But, the battery-powered drill was not powerful enough to torque the specialty drill bit. At first Karl tried exchanging the battery with another one, but drilling drained that second battery as well. Karl then got out a power drill, plugged it in, and then completed drilling the hole. Karl overcame a number of barriers (getting out a specialty drill bit, mounting vice grip, replacing battery, using different drill) in order to accommodate Evan’s request for a larger hole for the birdhouse. Karl’s willingness to complete these tasks showed support for Evan. Doing it with a smile showed his good-natured personality having fun with Evan sharing the activity. The event further demonstrated the character of the relationship between Evan and Karl.

![Figure 4.4. Karl accepting Evan’s influence to drill bigger hold in birdhouse.](image)
Learning about Evan. Another practice Karl used to take part in Evan’s life was learning about what interests Evan. Karl explained during our interview that learning about Evan’s interests helps the two of them build rapport. “Even though it might not seem [like] much to me,” Karl said, “I think it means a lot to him to learn all his new toys and gadgets and what they do” (5.02-25). This practice has been going on since Karl first became involved in Evan’s life. Karl remembers “We did … Thomas the Trains together, we would go get him a couple trains and then … he taught me what every train was and what it did” (5.02-29). After trains came Matchbox playing cars. Then, “for his birthday I got him these planes and they were all different kinds of jets and stuff. So, we played with those and learned about those” (5.02-29). Next, Karl continued, “we got into the Bakugans, and then, he would explain the levels and how you do the duels and stuff and now he’s into BeyBlades” (5.02-29). Each toy in its turn was important to Evan, so it was important to Karl.

Karl supported Evan’s interest in different toys by buying him the toys and learning about them. I visited the Welivers shortly after Christmas (5.2). Evan showed me some of the toys he had received, including a new BeyBlade fighting arena. BeyBlades are basically plastic or metal tops which are spun into an arena which forces collisions of the BeyBlades. The BeyBlade which spins the longest wins the battle. Evan described the various strategies for winning a battle and he showed me at least three different kinds of BeyBlades. He also shared why “rare” BeyBlades were desirable and which of his friends had what rare models.

With this introduction to BeyBlades, Karl shared with me that “to be a good parent you have to keep up with all this stuff” (5.4). Karl said he researched what was
popular with Evan, and then would take Evan to purchase the toys. Karl further explained to me aspects of BeyBlade toy playing. “The thing you have to understand is that these kids trade these things all the time” (5.4). Karl had recently taken Evan to the store to buy a new BeyBlade and asked about one he purchased earlier that week. To Karl’s surprise, Evan said “I traded that one the same day I got it.” Because Evan is gullible and an easy target for exploitation, Karl and Kara have instituted guidelines for Evan’s trading, “We have to tell him 1 for 1” (5.4). During one observational visit I noticed Evan had a hip holster, which looked like a tape measure. I asked what it was and he told me it was so he could have fast access to his BeyBlade and be ready for battle in a moment’s notice. As stated above, the particular toy was not important but the fact that Evan showed interest in the toy made it important for Karl.

Evan reflected on Karl’s interest in his life positively. “[Karl’s] tried to get involved with me and tried to know me better so he can know me and do stuff. And tried to get real close to each other so we can be basically like my father” (5.03-48). Evan saw Karl’s efforts as important in becoming a like his father. Evan’s use of the plural first person “we” signals the joint nature of the process. Mutual claiming was important for Karl to become like Evan’s father.

**Culture of Support**

The relational culture of support between Karl and Evan shapes Karl’s role as a stepfather who has fun with Even, learns about his interests, and teaches Evan practical skills. Karl saw his role as stepfather as a wonderful opportunity to watch a child develop and participate in the process. He incorporated his early experiences as a child into his actions as a stepfather. He also was the one who “lightens the mood” (05.01-SR). His
actions seem focused on developing a positive friendship with Evan, participating with Evan in building projects, and teaching him how to be a tinkerer.

Recall that the culture of support in the stepfamily system shapes and is shaped by roles, attitudes and expectations, and actions of the family members and that the family culture may be more or less congruent with the relational culture. In the Weliver family, there seemed to be high congruence among Karl, Kara, and Evan about Karl’s role and about what counts as supportive. Explicit communication about the role “steps” should play in making major decisions helped develop congruent attitudes and expectations about Karl’s role in the family, especially in terms of disciplining Evan. Early and explicit communication about becoming a blended family also facilitated high congruence of beliefs about family life. The Welivers essentially asked for a commitment for total congruence from all members before becoming a family (see 5.01-141). Similarly, by spending time intentionally seeking to learn about Evan’s interests in toys, Karl was able to obtain high congruence with Evan about what was considered supportive. Karl admits it was a process of discovery, but it appeared to me to be fueled by respectful intentionality.

The Holland Family

Buck Holland works as a college professor at a trade school located 40 miles from his home. His wife, Caroline Holland, is a stay-at-home mom. She has been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS) which affects the family dynamic. Mitchel Love is a 14 year old freshman in high school. Buck is his stepfather. The household also includes two biological offspring of Buck and Caroline, John Holland and Jane Holland. John is 9
years old and Jane is 7 years old. In addition to children in his current stepfamily, Buck is also biological father to three other children.

**Buck’s Role**

Buck’s role in the stepfamily is significantly impacted by his concurrent role as a nonresident father as well as his role as husband to Caroline who has MS. In this section I describe how Buck, Caroline, and Mitchel see Buck’s role as stepfather and some of the issues associated with his role as nonresident father and as Caroline’s husband.

As stepfather. Buck is Mitchel’s stepfather. During each of their individual interviews, I asked these participants to share their perspective on an ideal stepfather. Caroline’s response indicated that her view of an ideal stepfather was influenced by her own family history as well as her current and former family experiences with Buck and Mitchel. “It would be Buck because … he’s just always there, emotionally and physically. …. My father would never do that with me, so it really is someone like Buck who is there for everything” (6.01-295). Buck strived to be an ideal stepfather to Mitchel. He viewed an ideal stepfather as “one who’s willing to just love the stepson like a son and take the word ‘step’ out of there” (6.02-174). Buck explained, “There’s still the father-son relationship, and so you have to just love them, do things with them, treat them the same as you would a biological child” (6.02-174). Mitchel also saw Buck as an ideal stepfather. Speaking generally about an ideal stepfather, Mitchel shared that ideal would be whatever is opposite from stereotypical. “Because like the stereotypical stepfather … treats his blood children like they’re fantastic, and then treats you like you’re nothing” (6.03-176). Alternatively, an ideal stepfather “just wants to be in your life, tries to be a part of your life and stuff. Gives advice” (6.03-170). Mitchel then commented, “Buck
does that. He gives good advice. Like if I ask questions about stuff that’s going on, he
gives good advice. And just understands what’s going on. Just kind of gets it” (6.03-170).
Mitchel felt that an ideal stepfather doesn’t show partiality, takes an active role in his
stepchild’s life and “gets it” (6.03-170). I probed to find out what it meant for a stepfather
to “get it” and Mitchel explained that an ideal stepfather lets his stepchild live their own
life, “He’s not just going to push you the way that he thinks is the right way” (6.03-172).
Mitchel concluded, “Buck is an ideal stepfather” (6.03-176). Buck’s fulfillment of his
role as a stepfather was ideal to Caroline, Buck, and Mitchel.

Buck, Caroline, and Mitchel all three consider the stepfather-stepchild
relationship a close, father-like relationship. Buck described his relationship with Mitchel
as “pretty good. I would just characterize it as pretty much a regular father-son
relationship” (6.02-131). Buck added, “I think in some respects, he and I are closer than
[he is with] his own dad. But I don’t know what he’d say about that” (6.02-131). Caroline
stated, “[Buck] is stepfather by definition but father in every sense of the word” (6.01-
SR). Caroline agreed with Buck’s assertion that “if Mitchel had something going on, he
would go to Buck before he’d go to his father” (6.01-172). From Mitchel’s perspective,
“after my mom and Buck got married, it was just he was Dad pretty much because he was
always there. He was the father figure. … He’s just there. He’s Dad” (6.03-10). When I
asked Mitchel to further describe the relationship, he described:

He’s always helped me with school work and stuff. Like I always had trouble
with math and stuff, and he would always help me out to figure it out. So and it’s
just the parental love. And it’s pretty abnormally normal, if you could think of it
like that. Like it’s not like he has to, but he does. It’s just because he’s a father. He’s my dad (6.03-158).

Because of Buck’s participation in his life, Mitchel saw Buck as a father. Because Buck is not biologically related to him, Mitchel described the relationship as “abnormally normal,” perhaps the best a stepfather can hope to achieve.

**As nonresident father.** Before Buck became a stepfather, he was a biological father. Buck wrote in the sentence completion exercise that “My child – ren are the best gifts I’ve ever received” (6.02-SR). It is significant that Buck expanded the sentence to include more than Mitchel, the “child” in the study. Buck and his first wife had three children before they divorced. But even after the divorce, Buck sought to be highly involved in his children’s lives:

I had originally wanted to have shared custody, but my ex-wife was not real happy with me after we split up, and so she contested pretty much everything and didn’t allow me [shared custody]. I had an apartment in [the town where they lived] originally so that I could be close to them, and then after [the custody] decision was made, then I moved … closer to where I was gonna work because I knew I wasn’t gonna see them as often as I wanted to anyway. And they were in school there, so I didn’t want to try to make them change their school and all that (6.02-51).

Buck tried to arrange a settlement where he could continue spending time with his children, but two factors limited him: his ex-wife’s antagonism and the custody agreement that was handed down from the court. As a father he was prohibited from seeing his children. Partly because of the limited amount of time he was able to spend
with his kids, Buck tried to compensate by being “fun dad” (6.02-97) when he was with them on the weekends. His role as “fun dad” with his children was not problematic when it was only him and his children, but when he became part of a stepfamily, his behavior created problems.

Looking back on the development of the stepfamily system, Caroline remembered “there [were] some very, very, very hard years where I just didn’t know how we were going to survive” (6.01-204). Buck saw their early history as a progression of “peaks and valleys” (6.02-102), centered on difficulties involving his biological children:

The conflicts would occur on the weekends when I had [my three biological kids]. When [they weren’t] around, then there wasn’t really that much conflict to deal with. So that took a while to work out. And then things got pretty stable and pretty good for a while. Then when Matt moved in with us, there was some conflict again with him not being the most warm and friendly to Caroline and vice versa. … And that took a while to work out again (6.02-102).

Buck saw the first four years as particularly difficult, but then tensions eased into a comfortable pattern.

I asked Buck to describe in more detail what “conflict” occurred when his biological kids were in the house. He explained that he had some “internal conflict” (6.02-96) about parenting Mitchel compared to his biological children. Therefore, he and Caroline argued about parenting:

Because I was with Mitchel all the time, it was easier for me to correct him and say, “Don’t do this,” or, “Pick up your toys,” or whatever. But when [my biological children] were there, I kind of became fun dad. I didn’t want to spend
my time disciplining them because I didn’t have them very much. And so that just
created some conflict between us – two different sets of rules for the different kids
(6.02-97).

Buck’s differential parenting between his stepson and his biological children was “the
one thing” that he and Caroline argued about most.

From Caroline’s perspective, the issue lasted much longer (about eight years) and
revolved around Buck’s loyalty to his biological children over her. She felt very
“insecure” (6.02-209) when his children were around because she believed “Buck would
leave me if that’s what they wanted him to do” (6.01-209). Caroline felt that resolution
came when Buck “started saying to them, ‘This is my wife’” (6.01-214). She felt like
Buck began sticking up for her; he demonstrated his loyalty to her over his loyalty toward
his biological children. At the time of the study, Caroline was confident in her
relationship with Buck, but getting there included some “rocky” (6.02-96) years.

From Buck’s perspective, the issue was primarily resolved through more effective
communication with one another. The Hollands eventually sought counseling for the
issue, and Buck described that learning to use “I-statements” instead of accusing the other
person was helpful, “Learning those kind of things I think helped us get through that
issue. And also the fact that we have our faith in common …, I think those two things
helped us get through” (6.02-98). Buck saw counseling and their religious participation as
a tool that helped them resolve their issues. Even though they went through some rocky
times, they have settled into a workable pattern of relating.

**Caroline’s sickness.** Buck’s role as father and stepfather in the Holland
household is influenced by the interactive dynamic resulting from symptoms of
Caroline’s illness. Caroline has been diagnosed with the disease Multiple Sclerosis (MS). Multiple sclerosis is a condition affecting a person’s nervous system (see National Society of MS, n.d.). The disease progresses slowly, over decades, and can eventually lead to loss of motor functioning or even death (see National Society of MS, n.d.). Caroline was diagnosed with MS in late 2004. The sickness has affected the decisions the family makes as well as what Caroline physically is able or unable to accomplish. For example, almost every afternoon Caroline would take a nap to help recover from fatigue (e.g., 6.8; 6.01-353). Mitchel even regarded his mother’s need for a nap as one of the family rules, “Let her get her nap in the middle of the afternoon or the early afternoon, or she’ll be cranky the rest of the day” (6.03-36). Caroline also avoided driving, especially at night, which affected her ability to transport her children to and from events. In 2008, the family moved into their current residence on account of the illness (6.1). They had been living in a bi-level townhouse which required Caroline to ascend and descend stairs several times a day. They moved into a ranch style home with a finished basement. In the new home, going up and down the stairs was optional for Caroline, not required. So, on days when Caroline was feeling particularly fatigued, she did not have to use the stairs (6.01-341).

Caroline is not the only one who must cope with the sickness. Because families operate interdependently (Bertalanffy, 1969; Whitchurch & Constintine, 2000), others in the family must also cope with Caroline’s ailment. For example, many of my observations included notes of Buck working around the house, cooking dinner, and serving his family (e.g., 6.8; 6.9). Many observations also included extended periods of Caroline sitting on the sofa (e.g., 6.2; 6.8). She usually read a book, worked a puzzle,
played a game, or watched TV during these periods. One particular day, I recorded the familiar scene in my fieldnotes:

Caroline reclined in her usual spot on the short sofa. The footstool adjacent to the sofa is piled with the TV remote, a crossword puzzle book, the “nook” electronic books, and the TV guide. … [This set-up] allows Caroline to sit there … for … long periods. After she sat down from walking [the dog], she did not get up [for the remainder of my visit, about another hour].

Buck, on the contrary, flitted between sitting and work. He prepared an egg salad sandwich for himself and Caroline. He made a plate with chips and the sandwich on a croissant roll. He put it in front of her on the lime-green footstool. He also placed a full glass of Pepsi. He then went back into the kitchen and prepared his own meal (6.8).

The fact the Buck was constantly moving in this scene and that Caroline was stationary for most of the observation helps demonstrate ways that Buck serves members of the Holland family. Buck monitored Caroline’s actions, assessed her needs, and provided the option for her to eat. During the visit I also saw Buck cleaning, offering and preparing food for John, walking the dog, and caring for his wife. In response to Caroline’s illness, Buck also took a large part in routine housework.

What is striking to me about Buck’s involvement in housework is not that he does it, per se, but rather his attitude toward it. He takes a servant’s disposition. Buck’s role as servant corresponds with the shared system of understandings that coordinates Buck’s role as a stepfather, nonresident father, and husband.
Actions

Two actions which shape and display the culture of support in the Holland family are their church participation and Buck’s assistance with Mitchel’s history project. Both of these activities demonstrate how Buck fulfills his role in the family and how he supports Mitchel.

Church involvement. One ritual which was important to the family relates to their faith in God. For Buck, even as a child “church and faith” were part of his family growing up (6.02-6). Buck wrote in his sentence completion exercise that “The strongest part of me – is my faith in God” (6.02-SR). Religious involvement was something he tried to teach his children as well. In his questionnaire he wrote “I want my children to – grow up to be happy, independent and respectful of others who maintain faith in God” (6.02-SR). During our interview, Buck also mentioned this idea, “I would hope that [my children] would all want faith in God to be part of their lives. I think that’s an important thing that can help with moral principles and living the right way” (6.02-194). I asked how he tries to teach this lesson to his kids. He listed a number of ways: attending church, being involved in church “not just going,” demonstrating the personal importance of faith, regular prayer before a meal, and showing gratitude for material possessions (6.02-196:198).

Modeling the kind of life he wanted to see in his children was very important to Buck. Mitchel described a story about Buck’s participation with a church ministry for young people:

The summer of 2009, Buck started a middle school youth group for kids that are like sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. And we just had it in our backyard and stuff.
We got out an amp, and we hooked up my iPod to it, and we played Christian music, we had games and stuff (6.03-200).

Buck initiated a ministry to middle-school kids in his church, which provided an example of the way he wanted his children to participate in church.

Church involvement wasn’t just something that was important to Buck. It was something Mitchel adopted as well. Buck remarked, “[Mitchel] has become very active and involved in the youth group at the church, and I’m very proud of him for taking that step in his faith and everything” (6.02-131). I attended a church service with the family one Sunday morning, and concur that the adults in their church, especially those who work with youth, see Mitchel as a leader (6.6). Church involvement was so important to Mitchel, in fact, that he hoped others see the Hollands as “good people, [because] we go to church, we’re religious. We try to help people as much as we can” (6.03-216). Church attendance became a dominant aspect of Mitchel’s definition of his family.

The ritual of church attendance and participation clarifies the culture of support between Buck and Mitchel. The relationship is characterized by shared actions and understandings about church. The culture of support between Buck and Mitchel also involves Buck serving Mitchel.

**Helping with homework.** One example in particular illustrates how Buck served Mitchel. During my interview with Mitchel I asked, “could you tell me some stories of some times that you felt like Buck was really behind you 100 percent or really cared for you” (6.03-155)? Mitchel responded, “Well, when I told him about the project, this history project, he was all for it 100 percent. We’ve been working on it since about 2:00pm” (6.03-156). Surprised by its recency, I asked “today” (6.03-157)? Mitchel
replied “Yeah. And he’s just been getting great ideas to help me out with it” (6.03-158). Mitchel and Buck were building a replica of a civil war era cannon using wood and PVC pipe. They had looked on the Internet and found a picture of a cannon, which they were using as their model (6.4).

After the interview I accompanied Mitchel to the garage where Buck was assembling the pieces to the cannon (see Figure 4.5) (6.4). Mitchel was very complementary of the work Buck had accomplished during our 45 minute interview. He said things like “this looks great!” and “Wow. I’m really impressed,” and “Thanks a ton.” Mitchel then suggested that the two paint the pieces of the cannon before affixing them to one another.

At first, Buck seemed to ignore the suggestion and continued talking about how they would next attach the pieces to one another. Mitchel persisted that it would be better if they painted first. Painting each piece separately, Mitchel reasoned, would allow them to cover the entire surface area of the pieces, which would need to be different colors, whereas affixing the pieces first would make this more difficult. As I listened to the
conversation, I recognized a twinge of tension that came from Mitchel’s persistence. He had presented an idea which Buck had passed over. By returning to his original assertion that they paint before attaching the pieces of the cannon, Mitchel introduced conflict. He did it assertively, and he explained his position clearly. Buck listened respectfully to Mitchel’s plan and acquiesced. The moment of tension I felt eased and the stepfather-stepson pair began to work cooperatively toward the completion of the cannon (6.4).

This event shows not only that Buck supported Mitchel by helping with the construction of the cannon but also that Buck was open to Mitchel’s suggestions for how best to complete the project.

**Culture of Support**

The relational culture of support in the Holland family shaped and was shaped by Buck’s role as stepfather and nonresident father as well as Buck’s willingness to provide moral guidance and to assist Mitchel with homework. Buck took a key role in Mitchel’s life. Mitchel reported on his leisure activity questionnaire that across a variety of activities, his biological father’s involvement was “not important” whereas Buck’s involvement was “somewhat important” (6.03-SR). Mitchel commented that with Buck, he felt comfortable sharing his feelings and ideas, whereas with his biological dad “I just kind of go with the flow” (6.03-236). “With Buck,” he continued “we argue sometimes, but it’s not big arguments. … We mostly get along” (6.03-237). Buck tried to do activities with Mitchel and Mitchel enjoyed and appreciated Buck’s involvement in his life. Mitchel said, “Buck is an ideal stepfather” (6.03-176).

At the level of the family system, Buck, Caroline, and Mitchel’s seem to have reasonably high levels of congruence in their beliefs about Buck’s role in the family, their
attitudes and expectations for how family members ought to behave. Buck’s role in the family is similar to his role with Mitchel. For example, he serves his biological children and his wife as much as Mitchel. The entire family attended church together and all members seemed to share similar beliefs about God and the importance of this ritual. In these ways the relational culture and the family culture are congruent.

The Jones Family

The culture of support maintained in the Jones family is based on active engagement with one another through shared family and individual connecting points. The family culture of support and the relational culture of support between stepfather Jim and his stepson Jake seem to be fully congruent with one another. That is, what counts as supportive at the relational level also counts as supportive at the level of the family system. The culture of support, relationships, and communication patterns are satisfactory to all members. There are challenges the family faces, particularly challenges that disrupt the routine connection. Nevertheless, the Joneses maintain an interactive culture of support through daily rituals. Jim Jones works in the computer field. Sally Jones recently began attending graduate school in the field of Education. The boys, Jared Patel, Daniel Jones, and Jake Patel, are fifteen, twelve, and ten respectively. Daniel is Jim’s biological son, while Jared and Jake are both Sally’s boys. This case looks at the role of stepfather and family rituals that evidence the culture of support between Jim and Jake as well as in the Jones family system.
Stepfather Role

The role of stepfather in the Jones family is analogous to the father role. Jim explained, “I envision a stepfather to be a dad, a father, and not to be biased on that biological line drawn” (7.02-224). Jim did not always think this way. He explained that Sally and her relationship with her stepfather expanded his notion of what a stepdad could be. “Before I met Sally my idea of a stepdad was some jackass that didn’t like his … stepkids. … I never came from a split home, so I had no idea. Normally you don’t hear anything positive about a stepfather” (7.02-223). His own experience has taught him differently, however. Jim cares about both of his stepsons as well as his biological son. He hugs everyone before leaving for work in the morning tells each son that he loves them (7.02-244). He shared excitedly, “And Jake, yeah I see so much of myself in Jake, just because of the time we’ve been together” (7.02-246). Along with Daniel, Jim sees Jared and Jake as his own sons.

Sally and Jake also both affirm this view of Jim as a stepfather. Jake explained, “I mean there might be some parents out there – stepparents who don’t do anything, but that’s the total opposite of [Jim]” (7.03-69). Jake listed a variety of ways that Jim was involved in his life: “He tells us funny jokes,” “he’s … really encouraging,” “He’s really fun to talk to about video games because he likes video games himself,” “he doesn’t yell that much,” “[he can help] if you’re having a problem with your computer, since he’s like a network engineer,” and “he’s really good at grilling and barbequing” (7.03-66:91). Jake saw a number of strengths and positive contributions Jim made to his life. Sally also affirmed Jim’s role in Jake’s life. “He loves him as if he is his own. … They joke a lot and share a lot of stories. They spend a lot of time together playing games (both video
and athletic)” (7.01-SR). She marveled that Jim had such a close relationship with Jake in spite of the fact that “he is not biologically related to him” (7.01-SR). These participants considered Jim’s role as stepfather to be the same as the role of father.

The role as stepfather was the same as father, but different. At least three contextual factors influenced Jim’s relationship with Jake because of their involvement in a stepfamily situation. First, Jim was provided an orientation by Sally. She was a relationship “conductor” (7.02-132) briefing Jim on how to best interact with her sons. Biological fathers are not necessarily afforded such an opportunity. Second, nonresident parents and visitation schedules do not apply to intact biological families. For the Joneses, however, the former spouses and their accompanying challenges were ever present. They were a significant influence on Jim and Jake’s relationship. A third influence on his relationship with Jake was his own biological son, Daniel. Daniel had several “issues” which affected the entire family dynamic.

**Relationship conductor.** Sally facilitated Jim developing a close relationship with Jake and Jared. She introduced Jim to a model of stepfathering and she gave Jim tips on how to best develop relationships with her two sons. Sally grew up in a divorced home but was very close to her stepfather. She wrote in her sentence completion exercise “My father – is stepfather by law, but my father in every way that really counts” (7.01-SR). Jim explained that Sally used her positive experience to help guide him, “She already … envisioned what a stepfather was and kinda gave me the guidelines to do it” (7.02-223). It was Sally’s relationship with her stepfather, who she considers to be her “real” father, which provided Jim a template from which to model his own role as a stepfather.
In addition to a general image of stepfathering, Sally also provided specific advice on how Jim could relate to each of her boys. Jim stated that he did “some work” (7.02-128) to develop the relationships, but “Sally definitely was the conductor in all of it” (7.02-132). He employed a metaphor from the game of chess, “So really she was the key in all of this, I’m just another pawn, maybe a rook, but definitely not a king” (7.02-132). Jim indicated that he was involved in the relationship, but he was not the mastermind behind the moves he took. In a hierarchy he was somewhere toward the bottom or in the middle, definitely not on top.

I was interested in the idea he was presenting. He finished his thought and, as illustrated in the following excerpt, I returned to the topic to probe further:

Me: What were some of the things that Sally did that helped cue you in?

Jim: Well, I mean, she definitely – she knew how to communicate, and I didn’t, so –

Me: What do you mean by that?

Jim: Well, you would talk to Jake differently than you would talk to Jared. I’m more of a blunt person and Jake still is fragile, he still is upset with his dad that he left and there’s certain ways that – to say things and she kinda helped me put what I wanted to say in a better way to say it.

Me: In a way that he’d hear it.

Jim: Yeah, so she just gave me some hints and ideas to talk to the boys, that’s all (7.02-155:160).

Through her guidance and his work, Jim was able to develop unique, satisfying relationships with both his stepsons. Jim explained, “[Jake] and I developed the quickest
relationship. His was easy. … He was just five, he [soon] turned six…. So really for him it was more natural” (7.02-128). Although “Jared was older” (7.02-128) and “there was some work that had to be done” (7.02-128), Jim felt he was able to develop a satisfying relationship with him as well.

Jim described some of the activities that helped create and develop his relationships. “Just making that effort to find some one on one with them is golden, and they love that” (7.02-128). For Jared, one-on-one time happened through recreational activities, playing racquetball, fishing, jogging, or hunting. “Really, just spending time with them, meals together, Jake then came in the [Cub] Scouts the following year, so I helped in their dens. I went to school had lunch with Jared, Jake, and Daniel; they loved that” (7.02-132). Sally provided some hints and Jim followed-up on them.

Sally shared that as Jim spent time with her sons, the bond between them developed on its own. Sally fondly recalled the first time that Jared called Jim “Dad:”

It was hunting season about a year [ago]. [Jared] went out with my grandfather and Jim, and … when he came back, Jared was like, “Mom, you should’ve seen dad.” I started crying – and he’s like what’s wrong – because I was happy because they made their own relationship on their own time (7.01-14).

Even though Sally said they “made their own relationship,” Jim credited Sally with much of the result.

Jim worked to develop the relationships because “I wanted everything to work. I still want everything to work” (7.02-162). This motivation to see the relationship develop was a key reason Jim accepted his wife’s advice as a relationship conductor.
**Jake’s nonresident father.** A second major influence on Jim Jones’ role as stepfather was Sally’s ex-husband Charlie, Jared and Jake’s nonresident father. Jim and Charlie did not have a good relationship with one another. Jim harbored a deep disdain for Charlie, to the point that he is not even on speaking terms with him: “I’ve said maybe 20 words in the five plus years I’ve known him. I already told the boys …. [if] he’s not a friend of your mom, he’s not a friend of mine” (7.02-195). Jim explained that the feelings he has toward Charlie are reciprocated:

Charlie hates me because they call me dad. He hates that, he has yelled at them, he has grounded them, he has punished them to the point where they know that they can’t even breathe that word. … But you ask any therapist or any lawyer or any judge, you can’t make a kid do anything that they don’t want to do. They say what’s natural to them (7.02-204).

Charlie hated Jim because of the relationship Jake and Jared had with him. He especially became angry when they referred to Jim as “dad.” Jim’s disdain came from stories he’d heard and encounters he’d had with Charlie. Because of their animosity toward one another, they did not spend much time together. Nevertheless, Charlie’s actions, past and present, exerted influence on the Jones family system.

Sally described how Charlie’s performance as a father and the timing of the divorce influenced the role Jim played in their lives. For example, Sally mentioned that because he was older, “Jared already had an established relationship with Charlie, so Jim’s sort of a secondary [dad]” (7.01-125). She went on to explain “There’s definitely the relationship there” (7.01-125), and she gave an example of a time after the death of Jared’s biological paternal grandfather when Jim was the one to console him. Jim “found
[Jared] crying on the couch, and Jim held him for a little while and hugged him” (7.01-126). She concluded, “they have a relationship but I don’t think it’s a close father/son bond which I see with Jake” (7.01-126). Regarding Jim’s relationship with Jake, Sally also saw the timing of the divorce as a salient factor. “I just think Jake was looking for that kind of relationship with a dad and Jim was looking for that kind of relationship with a son and the two of them have a similar personality which 90% of the time is really good” (7.01-16). Jim’s relationships with Jared and Jake were impacted by the fact that Jared spent the first nine years of his life with Charlie, his biological dad, whereas Jake only spent five years with him.

Another way that Charlie impacts the Jones family is through sharing information with Jake and Jared that Sally and Jim think is inappropriate. For example, Jared, now age 15, was starting to talk with his dad about girls. Sally was distraught by this behavior because Charlie had numerous affairs when he was married to Sally, “so as far as a role model for how to treat girls, I don’t – I’m glad he talks to Jim and myself still about it so that we can give him another opinion” (7.1-4). So it seemed one part of Jim’s role as stepfather was to counteract the messages his stepsons hear from their biological father.

Another way Jim’s role in the stepfamily was defined and influenced by Charlie was being a safe place for his stepsons to share information about their nonresident experiences. Sally admitted that she would get too emotional to listen calmly to her sons’ reports when they return from Charlie’s house. She admitted, “I’m just enraged with the way they treat the kids and the things they say and do and I … actually need a few minutes to just keep thinking to myself we love these kids, we know they’re jerks” (7.01-157). To keep from exploding, she adhered to the advice her stepfather once gave her
regarding her biological father. “He said I always had to remember my love for you girls was stronger than my hate for your dad” (7.01-157). In contrast, Sally shared, “Jim is much better … [about] just hearing what they say” (7.01-24). So, Jim served as a safe place for Jake and Jared to share about their weekend visitations with Charlie.

**Daniel’s issues.** A third influence on Jim as stepfather is Daniel, his biological son. Daniel is the middle child in the Jones family. Daniel’s influence in the family system often causes stress. He has been diagnosed with multiple psychological disorders. In my first phone conversation with the Joneses (pre visit fieldnote), they mentioned that their middle son “has issues.” They wanted to know if this fact would disqualify them from participating in the study. When I reassured them it would not, they began sharing more about the nature of the “issues.” “He sees a psychologist and a psychiatrist,” Sally informed. Jim chimed in “ADHD [Attention Deficit and Hyperactive Disorder] and mental other have been the diagnosis, but he’s kind of across diagnoses” (pre-visit fieldnotes). They said he has problems with lying and he writes dark things for a 7th grader. As I got to know the family, some of the ways Daniel’s issues impacted Jim as stepfather became apparent. From time to time, I forgot that Jim was unrelated to Jake and Jared because he almost seemed more comfortable with them than he did with Daniel.

Daniel’s behavior is troublesome for the family. Because Daniel is small and soft spoken, he appears helpless and weak. Physically he is small. But, Sally confessed that Daniel has a bad temper and sometimes will become very aggressive. The first night I was with the family they were sharing thoughts about Daniel’s “issues” (7.1). Sally said it had been a challenge to their relationship. Jim, from the kitchen where he was doing the
dishes chimed in, “more like a strain” (7.1). He went on to state that his relationship with Jake and Jared is probably better than his relationship with Daniel: “Jake and Jared are easy,” he said, “Daniel is a challenge” (7.1).

Besides causing strain on the marital relationship, Daniel also creates a difficult situation for how Jim and Sally relate to Jake. Whereas Jim has ways of connecting with Jake and Jared (like running or cooking), he has had a harder time finding an activity that is safe and enjoyable for him and Daniel. “[Jim’s] tried to do cooking with Daniel. Daniel doesn’t listen and Jim doesn’t have the patience with him and we’re afraid he’s going to get hurt. He’s tried exercise and sports and Daniel’s not interested in any of that” (7.01-166). Instead of completing pro-social activities together, Daniel is typically caught misbehaving. For example, at his mother’s house Daniel was found playing with matches, which caused the Joneses to hide the matches at their house in order to prevent serious injury or property damage (7.01-168). Such behavior results in Daniel receiving punishments or lectures, which, in turn, spurs jealousy from Jake. Jim explained in the following excerpt:

The hardest part is just dealing with Daniel in all of this, I mean it’s definitely just riding his butt all the time. … And like we said before it’s trying to correct Daniel and trying to get him on track. It’s negative, but it’s attention. Jake really feels threatened by that (7.02-135).

As Jim pointed out, the energy spent correcting Daniel made it more difficult to develop a relationship with Jake.

The future is also uncertain for Daniel. Jim expressed the concern, “We’re just praying for a good, average man” (7.02-183). “We’re really afraid he’s gonna be 30 plus
in our basement living. I hope that’s not true. … For him, if he can just graduate high school we’ll just keep our fingers crossed” (7.02-175). Jim feared that Daniel will never mature to the point where he can be trusted to be alone. The indefinite future was daunting.

Jim’s experiences as a father certainly impacted his views on being a stepfather. He gladly and willingly adapted to Sally’s ways of doing things. He reported that when the families joined, he was just starting to get an idea of the scope of Daniel’s issues. He didn’t want to believe the teachers who alerted him there may be a problem. But, when the families joined, the behavioral and emotional issues became all too obvious.

In the Jones family the stepfather role is one where Jim sees himself as a father. His role is significantly impacted by his wife, by Charlie who is the Jared and Jake’s biological father, and his own biological son. The family culture of support not only coordinates understandings regarding Jim’s role but also regarding family rituals. In the Jones family, since the relational and family cultures of support are based on interaction and connection, the rituals they practiced facilitated these aims.

**Connecting Rituals**

This section describes three rituals I observed which facilitated connection among the Jones family members. I asked Jim to describe the Joneses. He thought for a moment and then said:

The Joneses, we are the – we are a family. And I know that we’re not all blood related, but I like to think that people would be confused about that and I think they are. I think that people that don’t know us would think that we are one family and they’re all our kids. … I guess that’s kinda the goal. And reality is that we’re
a family. There’s no discerning who belongs to who, it’s just all one big family (7.02-256).

This depiction of the Joneses, I think, is accurate. And, as Jim commented “it’s definitely not easy to get where we’re at.” In this section, I describe three rituals which helped bring the Jones family to the place of connection and interaction they are today. The first is a daily ritual of sharing experiences at the dinner table. The second is a family movie night. Third, the Joneses played games together, which also fostered connection and interaction.

High-low. I arrived for the orientation with the Joneses at 6:30pm on a weeknight. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes described the scene:

Sally greeted me at the door and said, “we’re just sitting down to dinner.” She apologized that they were “running behind” and offered me a plate and a place at the table. As I entered the dining room, Jim shook my hand. The family began eating dinner and they tried to make some conversation with me. It was a bit awkward at first, although I tried my best to make it more comfortable by telling them not to worry about me and by asking a few questions. Jim, after a moment, said something like “we can just – “ and didn’t finish the sentence. He gestured with his hand to complete the thought: Do what we normally do. The family then did “high-low,” a family interaction technique to share the best and worst part of the day with one another.

Sally directed and said “Okay, Jake?” Jake began by sharing that his low for the day was that they had to start back to school today [after the winter break]. Then Sally said to Daniel, seated next to Jake, “Daniel, what was your low?” Daniel
also shared about an incident at school…. [Going counter-clockwise around the table, I would be next.] They skipped me and Jared [who was seated to my right] went next. He shared a low. Then Sally shared something from the day followed by Jim who completed the circle. After Jim shared his “low,” Jake was instructed by Sally to share what his “high” was. They went around the table in the same order sharing their “high.” By this point, most of them had finished their dinner (7.1).

I observed this ritual four times. It occurred during every visit I made to the Jones household during the evening. The second time, after they went around the circle they invited me to join them by sharing my low, and then after they all shared their high, they asked me to share my high. The last time I visited, I was incorporated into the ritual during what would be my turn around the table. I was asked to share in the midst of the ritual, not after all the family had shared.

One night, after the high-low ritual as Jim was cleaning up the dinner dishes, I asked some questions to learn more about the practice. There are a few ground rules associated with the sharing. Family members are supposed to share a high and low from an event that happened while they were away from each other. For the kids, this rule meant they were to share something about their school day. During the weekend, this rule was relaxed. But the boys were not allowed to share about a video game “high” or success. Jim said the ritual is “an attempt to get them [the kids] talking about their day” (7.5). It has been part of the family’s practice, Jim continued, “since I started having dinner over here” (7.5). The High-Low ritual was in place when Sally was a single mother and is linked to the Jones’ practice of eating dinner together almost every night.
The ritual promoted connection and interaction. It created a connection point between the parents and the kids. Since, during the week at least, they spent most of their waking hours separated, High-Low gave them opportunities to inform the other family members about events that they valued as a high point or low point. The practice created opportunities for the family to gauge the emotional lives of its members.

High-Low was the ritual practiced the most by the Joneses, but there were at least two others that also were meaningful to the family and which prompted interaction and connection. Eleven year old Jake described the two rituals: family movie night and family game night:

Mom definitely likes watching movies with us; she likes a lot of family stuff.
That’s what mom really likes, and then Jim, he likes when we play games with each other. …So we have two different family occasions. Family movie night, and the other one doesn’t happen as much because mom’s not into games as much but we have family game night sometimes. And we’ll go downstairs and play [on the video gaming system] a … game of hockey or something like that together. Or it’s not always video game wise, we … pull out like monopoly out of a closet over there. …I think Jim enjoys … playing stuff (7.03-118:119).

**Movie Night.** One of the observational visits I scheduled with the family fell on an evening they decided to have a family movie night (7.7). This particular evening, Sally was out of town visiting her father who was having double hip replacement surgery. Daniel was spending the evening with his mother which normally would mean that Jared and Jake were with their biological father. However, this particular evening, their father could not take them. I arrived at the house at 5pm and Daniel left almost immediately
afterward. He was scheduled to be gone for three hours and return just before bedtime at 8pm.

Jim prepared dinner and he, Jared, and Jake ate together. The seating around the table was different since two family members were gone. They discussed starting the movie while they ate, but decided to do high-low before starting the movie. During the high-low ritual, they turned off the television and shared with one another. Immediately afterward, they moved to the living room and took their “normal” spots (cf. 7.7 with 7.03-109). Prior to this observational visit, in my interview with Jake he described everyone’s normal location during movie night (7.03-109). During my observation, everyone got situated in their typical location, except Sally was gone and I was sitting where Daniel normally sat. The importance of this detail is that the ritual was practiced frequently enough to routinize something as minute as the seating arrangement. Moreover, Jake recognized that there was a particular seating arrangement associated with family movie night.

Family movie is a shared family activity, even if not a highly interactive one. The ritual implied a particular set of practices. It was a family “event” that they looked forward to doing together. It created a shared experience which connected the family in terms of the content they viewed. These details about the event endowed it with meaning for the family members.

**Gaming.** Another family ritual which fostered connection and interaction was gaming. The family played World of Warcraft (WoW), X-box, and board games together. At different points in my observations, I was able to witness each of these activities. In fact, one of the first visits I made to the family was on a Saturday morning from about
10am until noon (7.2). I arrived and Jim and Jake were sitting at the dining room table and the adjacent computer desk playing WoW together. Around 11am, Jared returned from spending the night with a friend and joined the game on a computer located downstairs in the basement. During game play, Jim and Jake talked aloud with one another about the game and about other topics. They also utilized an instant-message feature of the game to send type-written messages to one another and others who were playing the game with them via internet. So, even though playing video games together may seem absent of interactivity, the particular way the Joneses played World of Warcraft created moments (and hours) of interactivity and connection through shared activity.

Jim, actually, was the one who introduced Jake and Jared to the game. He adopted the perspective, “if you can’t beat them, join them.” This practice was something that was valued by Jake. In fact, when I asked Jake to share times that he appreciated Jim being involved in his life, the first thing he mentioned was related to video gaming, “When we play World of Warcraft … he gives me his gold [a valuable item in the game] sometimes, he’ll – he helps me with dungeons and stuff, and he just does a lot of nice stuff on World of Warcraft” (7.03-66). Game play was an important way to connect with and show support to Jake.

During another visit with the family, I witnessed them play a board game (7.4). I arrived for dinner which included the high-low routine. After dinner, we cleared the table and then played Farckle, a dice game where you get points for rolling various combinations of dice. The game lasted about 45 minutes. Once the game was over, Sally served a cake she, Daniel, and a cousin had made earlier in the day. As soon as the cake
was served, the family dispersed. Jared took his piece of cake and went downstairs to play video games. Jake went upstairs, and later followed Jared downstairs. Daniel stayed at the table with Jim, Sally, and me. After Jared went downstairs, Daniel asked permission and followed Jake down to play video games, too. Playing Farckle together seemed to create a reason for the family to spend time together as a unit. Immediately following the game, the kids gravitated downstairs to play video games which took them away from Jim and Sally who remained upstairs. Thus, the family game was a centripetal force that created times for interaction and connection.

The high-low ritual, family movie night, and family gaming created space for interactivity and connection. High-Low provided opportunity to be aware of other family members’ emotional lives and perspectives. Family movie night was anticipated and ritualized to the point that there was a specific seating arrangement for family members. Gaming created a shared experience and opportunity for interaction about and around an activity. In sum, each of the rituals allowed opportunity for the family to be together and interact with one another.

**Culture of Support**

The relational culture of support between Jim and Jake shaped and was shaped by Jim’s role as stepfather and the activities in which he engages. Particularly, Jim’s role as stepfather was guided by Jake’s mother and compared with Jake’s biological father. Jim also was influenced by Daniel’s role as Jim’s biological son helped define and refine Jim’s identity. The relational culture between Jim and Jake also was characterized by a warm, close connection and shared activities. Sally presented her perspective on Jim’s relationship with Jake which encapsulates their relational culture of support:
Jim has a very close relationship [with Jake]. He loves him as if he is his own and is actually closer to [Jake] than his own son!! They joke a lot and share a lot of stories. They spend a lot of time together playing games (both video and athletic). I am amazed at how much [Jim] loves [Jake] and that he is not biologically related to him (7.01-SR, punctuation in original).

Rituals, like gaming, gave Jim opportunities to support Jake by sharing valued resources, even if only in a virtual world.

In the Jones family, there seemed to be high congruence in the image of Jim as (step)father and the beliefs about what counted as a supportive relationship. Partly, this high congruence was achieved through active, intentional coordination by Sally, the relationship “conductor” (7.02-132). Sally helped Jim communicate with Jake and Jared in ways they would understand as supportive. High congruence likely also was achieved through shared family activities (e.g., Farckle, Movie Night, family dinner). Such rituals create opportunities for interaction and connecting points for the entire family. For example, the high/low ritual practiced at family dinner provided the opportunity for family members to become familiar with one another’s’ emotional life. Such connection may itself be a form of emotional support (i.e., listening: McNeely & Barber, 2010). More generally, however, joint activities may have helped achieve high congruence of beliefs and images related to support.

**Examining Cultures of Support**

This chapter seeks to accomplish the first aim of this research project by describing and examining the stepfather-stepson culture of support in six stepfamily
systems. Culture, at both the relational and family levels, shapes and is shaped by roles, attitudes and expectations, and actions. Within each case, I have presented evidence from multiple informants (stepfathers, mothers, youth), multiple types of data (interview, observation, self-report), and across multiple time points (i.e., from visits spanning about a month with each family) in order to demonstrate the relational and family culture I’ve attributed to each stepfamily. This chapter has presented the relational culture of support in six stepfamily systems.

To conclude this chapter, I offer some thoughts about the embedded nature of relational cultures within stepfamily systems. I speculate how relational cultures overlap with broader family cultures. In this study, there seemed to be either a single, dominant culture where the relational culture was integrated into the family culture or a situation where there were parallel cultures or subcultures combining to create a dominant family culture.

Four of the families seemed to have integrated the relational culture of support into a stable, dominant family culture. In these families, the boundaries around the relational culture are unclear, seamlessly weaving into the fabric of the family culture of support. This seemed the case among the Kings, Hollands, Welivers, and Joneses. In the Weliver family, congruent images of stepfather support seemed to have developed through consensual commitment to the family, explicit communication about discipline, and intentional stepfather-stepson relational development. Each of the families seemed to have used an integrative strategy for combining the relational culture of support with the broader family culture of support.
The remaining two families seemed to exhibit non-integrative strategies for combining relational and family cultures. In the Jacobs family, the relational culture of support seemed to function as a subculture which deviated from the dominant family culture. That is to say, the norms for support differ by context. Whereas in the relational culture of support Darren and Brad seem to share expectations for support behaviors, in the family context there seems to be less congruence about Darren’s role as stepfather or what types of support behavior he should enact. A family culture seems to have developed in which Darren defers to Karen to provide Brad with support, especially if Brad’s actions do not align with Darren’s views of appropriate behavior. In the Fisher family, perhaps because of their role differentiation, the relational culture of support seemed to operate parallel to the family culture of support. There did not seem to be a single, entire family culture of support. Rather, there appeared to be sets of relational cultures which operated relatively independent of one another. In these two cases there was not a single, dominant culture of support which was shared by all family members. Instead, parallel or subcultures developed.

Both integrative and non-integrative strategies seemed functional for stepfamilies and this analysis does not necessarily suggest that one is better than the other. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that relational and family cultures were distinct in some cases and indistinct in others. This finding may have implications for family counselors and interventions, since modifying stepfather-stepson relational cultures, in non-integrative stepfamilies, may or may not significantly impact the culture of the stepfamily system and vice versa.
This chapter has presented the culture of support in six stepfamily systems. I described in detail the stepfather role and influences on that role for each family. I also presented various attitude, expectations, and actions in the form of specific rituals and activities which displayed the culture of support in the stepfamily systems. Finally, I concluded with thoughts about integrative and non-integrative strategies used to combine relational cultures with the larger family cultures.
Chapter 5: Cross Case Analysis of Support

The purpose of this chapter is to list some of the ways stepfathers across the six cases showed support to their stepsons. While the previous section focuses on the culture of support within six cases, this section looks across the six case studies (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2008) to present practices and processes of supportive stepfather-stepson communication. I organize this chapter into four sections. The first three sections discuss three types of support: emotional, instrumental, and informational. At a very broad level, these types of support encompass the possible interactions stepfathers might have with their stepsons. In the fourth section I present the concept of micro support messages (MSM) as a distinct category of supportive stepfather-stepson communication.

**Emotional Support**

Stepfathers in this study showed their stepsons emotional support in a variety of ways, including by showing affection, providing encouragement, and praising a stepchild. This occurred both verbally and nonverbally. The second type of emotional support comes from spending time together. Stepfathers spent one-on-one time with their stepsons as well as time with the entire family. The third way stepfathers communicated emotional support is particular to their position as stepfathers – stepfathers “claimed” their stepsons as their own (Marsiglio, 2004b). Although all six stepfathers admitted the importance of claiming their stepsons at some level, they varied in the extent to which they believed and practiced “claiming.” I also present how stepsons, through the use of the “Dad” label, claimed their stepfathers as their own.

**Encouraging and saying “I love you.”** The first way stepfathers showed emotional support was by verbally expressing affection, praise, or encouragement for
their stepsons. Sometimes these messages were direct and unambiguous. For example, stepson Jake talked about a time his stepfather Jim Jones said something which encouraged him, “I got a goal in my hockey game on the Play Station, and I’m just like, ‘Yeah I got a goal!’ And [dad is] like, ‘Woo-hoo!’ So he’s like really encouraging” (7.03-69). Nick King also shared how he tries to praise his stepson Christian, “I … tell him how he’s done a good job when he does something right. And just trying to show him a little support” (2.02-173). Nick went on to share about a recent 10 mile hike he and Christian took with the Boy Scouts. When Christian was getting tired toward the end of the hike, Nick said, “I tried to pump him up a little bit and tell him …, ‘You’ve done so good all this far. Don’t give up, keep going’ So I try to be supportive that way as best I can” (2.02-173). Bill Fisher also commented that he tries to praise his kids by saying things like “I’m proud of you,” and “You done well” (4.02-20). Verbal praise was important way for Darren to show emotional support to Brad, but his praise was also tied to a reward. Darren explained, “So it’s one of those ‘you’re doing good so we’re gonna go do this’ or ‘I’m proud of you so we’re gonna go hunting’ or something like that” (3.02-245). These direct expressions of praise clearly served as emotional support.

Some, although not all of the stepfathers in this study, also said the words “I love you” to their stepsons. For Darren, the phrase “I love you” was reserved for women, so he did not share it with his stepson. Jim Jones, on the other hand tried “to tell [his stepsons] every day I love them, even [16 year old] Jared. He doesn’t want to say it back, but I still do ” (7.02-244). Bill Fisher told me that sometimes he has told his 17 year old stepson “I love you” after emotionally charged confrontations. After some “knock-down, drag-out fights” he and Sam “ended up bawling and hugging each other” (4.02-42).
that context, Bill tells Sam, “Whether you believe it or not, I love you as much as my own two kids. … I think of you as my kid and I just want what is best for you” (4.02-42). Buck Holland offered his rationale for sharing love. “I think … kids, especially younger kids, … are really just looking for love and approval, and if they’re getting that, then they’ll be happy in the situation regardless of whether it’s a biological parent [supplying it] or not” (6.02-180).

Communication of emotional support was not always direct. One stepfather, Bill Fisher, shared how his messages of affection, encouragement, and praise were sometimes packaged as teasing. They were indirect and somewhat ambiguous messages of emotional support. Because Bill has been involved in his life since Steve was young, Bill is able to reminisce with Steve and tease him based on what he did when he was younger. “Well you know how kids are when you’re first talking, he wanted to do things as a ‘flamily’. So we always tease him about when we have ‘flamily movie night’” (4.02-113). This lighthearted ribbing was a way to express affection verbally by recalling shared experiences. The message also spoke to the longevity of their Bill and Steve’s relationship. Another way Bill showed affection was by giving nicknames to his children. He explained, “I give everybody nicknames. I mean I don’t call anyone by their right name, I never have” (4.02-38). He shared the names he’s given each of his biological children as well as his two stepchildren. Our conversation went like this:

Bill: Steve, he’s ‘Stevey-Shark’.
Me: Yeah, I’ve heard you say that.
Bill: That’s more from his mom, but it picked it and I’ll even just – I’ll drop the Steve and it’s, “Hey Shark.”
Me: Yeah, I’ve heard you say that too. I was curious –

Bill: Yeah, because he is like a Great White shark at times (4.02-40:42).

Teasing was a common way for stepfather Bill Fisher to show affection for his stepson Steve. Although the support message was wrapped in humor, it was understood as a friendly, affectionate gesture.

**Showing support without words.** Another way of communicating affection, encouragement, and praise was through nonverbal messages. Giving hugs, personalizing tone, attending events, and creating a safe environment were all ways stepfathers communicated emotional support to their stepsons. Giving hugs was way of showing emotional support. Jim Jones shared, “I still hug all of them before I leave in the morning for work” (7.02-244). In the Weliver family, Karl said:

I do a thing called a family hug that [Evan] thinks is neat where I’ll say, “Oh, I need the family hug,” so Evan comes over and I give him this hug … and then we’ll get the older kids involved and we’ll go, “It’s a family hug now,” and all … have a big group hug (5.02-156).

Bill Fisher told me that giving Steve hugs is a bit of a challenge since Steve dodges them. “I’ll sneak one in on him every now and then. Come up behind him and give him a hug” (4.02-42). Hugs were one way stepfathers communicated emotional support nonverbally.

Another way of giving nonverbal messages of emotional support was in customizing tone. Stepfather Jim Jones shared that in order to effectively communicate emotional support to Jake he needed to adjust his tone. Jim’s wife Sally gave him cues on how to best talk with Jake, “Well, you would talk to Jake differently than you would talk to Jared. I’m more of a blunt person and Jake still is fragile. … [Sally] kinda helped me
Jim adjusted his nonverbal communication style and tone in order to be sensitive to his stepson’s personal communication style.

Attending important events was another way of showing support without words. For Nick King, attending events that showed off Christian’s work was supportive. The message sent by taking part in these events was “you’re important.” Nick provided the following example:

They had a science fair one time. And just us going to – Julie and myself – and he appreciates his mom more than me, but just the fact that we went and he got to walk us through and show us the different things they were working on, the different projects. That’s a big deal to him because he’s pretty proud of that type of thing (2.02-187).

Nick admitted that his presence wasn’t as important to Christian as his mom’s presence, but spending the time required to attend the event was an important way to show emotional support.

The final way a stepfather showed emotional support nonverbally was through creating a non-stressful, safe household climate vis-à-vis the stepson’s nonresident father’s house. At the time of my study, the Joneses had recently had a custody evaluation. Although it was a tense time, Jim shared, “I was so relieved and happy when the [evaluator] met with us and said, ‘The boys don’t want anything to change, they like it the way it is’” (7.02-186). Jim continued relating the evaluator’s assessment, “There’s a lot of stressors at the other house, and they just feel so comfortable at our house” 7.02-186). Jim felt that Charlie, the boy’s biological father, led a stressful life and the boys
“definitely sense it” (7.02-188); whereas, the Jones household was characterized by shared, enjoyable experiences. In Charlie’s house, Jim continued, it’s all about Charlie. In contrast, “We’re about the kids” (7.02-188). Providing a safe climate of enjoyment and community was a profound way Jim showed emotional support.

**Spending time together.** The mere act of spending time together is another way that stepfathers showed support for their stepsons. They co-participated with their stepsons in activities they enjoyed. This co-participation was done one-on-one as well as with the whole family.

**One-on-one.** Several examples of activities were done one-on-one with stepfathers and stepsons. Stepfathers went fishing, hunting, and hiking with stepsons. They went to parks and shared special activities together, like going to eat lunch at the school cafeteria. I observed three different ways stepfathers shared activities with their stepsons. First, many of the activities where stepfathers and sons spent time one-on-one were activities which either the stepfather had expertise in or the stepfather had done himself as a child. Darren Jacobs introduced stepson Brad to a variety of outdoor activities including mountain and road biking, hunting, fishing, camping, and backpacking. Some of the times Darren and Brad did these activities there were others present, like Darren’s father or uncle. However, these were also activities that they did one-on-one.

Second, some of the activities were customized to the stepson’s interests, desires, or likes. Karl Weliver, for example, tried to practice a special ritual unique to his relationship with stepson Evan. Karl had individual one-on-one rituals he completed with his two biological children, so he also created one to practice with Evan. It was not an
elaborate or expensive ritual, but it was consistent: “Evan’s favorite thing is once a month, go to [the local convenience store] and get a donut and a chocolate milk” (5.02-380) I observed Bill Fisher spend one-on-one time with Steve while Pamela was at a parent-teacher conference (4.4). He played video games with Steve and they watched a TV show together. Steve suggested both activities and they lasted as long as Steve wanted to do them. Customizing one-on-one time around the stepsons interests was another way stepfathers showed emotional support.

The third way stepfathers spent one-on-one time with stepsons was by just sharing life events. One evening on his way home from work, Nick King saw black bear lying in between the corn rows on their property. Nick drove to the house, got Christian, and took him to see the site (2.6). Sharing activities like this one was another way that a stepfather spent one-on-one time with his stepson. It was a shared activity that served as a form of emotional support in which the relationship could develop. Nick could have simply told Christian about it, but instead, he took Christian to see it. Sharing stepfather hobbies, pass times, or childhood experiences, customizing an activity for a stepson, and sharing life’s events were three ways that stepfathers in these cases spent one-on-one time with their stepsons.

*With the entire family.* Stepfathers also spent time with their stepsons in the context of the entire family. Doing activities together as a family was an important way to show emotional support and also family solidarity. Bill Fisher told that he knew his stepsons appreciated him because “any time we plan anything …. If something comes up where I can’t make it, most of the time the boys will want to reschedule until I can” (4.02-113). Being included in “family” activities made Bill feel accepted. The Jones
family took advantage of the weather and a “snowman kit” they had received as a gift to work as a family to build a snowman in their front yard (see Figure 5.1) (7.2). The King family shared a family tradition of pumpkin carving at Halloween which got everyone involved. I visited the day they were doing this ritual and took a picture of Christian’s jack-o-lantern (see Figure 5.2) (2.2). Karl Weliver shared that the “most important” family value is “that we all know that we are one” (5.02-404). He gave an example, “If me and Kara go out for ice cream we will bring back the kids ice cream. So, not being left behind, we’re very – it’s kind of like we’re a very tight family” (5.02-404). Sharing activities, no matter how mundane, helped develop Karl’s relationship with Evan in the context of their entire family.

Figure 5.1. Jones family snowman.
The most common reoccurring situation where stepfathers shared activities with their stepsons in the context of the entire family was family dinner time. This activity, in many ways, forced the family to spend time together. Jim and Sally were intentional about not only spending time together over family dinner but also seeking to connect with one another. During their nightly dinner, the family practiced a “high-low” ritual (discussed in the previous section) where they shared their high point and low point from the day. Because talking and listening to youth is an important aspect of emotional support (McNeely & Barber, 2010), the family ritual provided a consistent opportunity to enact emotional support. Even when Sally was out of town, Jim and his two stepsons performed the ritual. They rarely miss it, from what I observed.

Other families also expressed the importance of family dinner as a connecting point for the family members. Karl Weliver told me that his work schedule allowed him flexibility necessary to spend a lot of time with Evan. He shared an example, “I can normally come home every night and eat supper with him and talk and see how school was and things like that” (5.02-192). For Karl, dinner provided an opportunity to hear about Evan’s day. Julie King told me during our interview that dinner time was important
in her family of origin and also something she sees as important for her current stepfamily. I asked why dinner was important to her. She replied, “I think it brings the family together. You get a chance to interact with each [person]. I think nowadays, you don’t get that as much” (2.01-126). She went on to share “I’m especially glad that we do it or have done it because Jonah’s no longer here, so I have that memory of that” (2.01-126). Sharing dinner as a family created space for relationships to develop. It generated a cache of memories. It also provided stepfathers an opportunity to talk and listen to their stepsons in the context of the broader stepfamily system.

**Claiming.** Because stepfathers are not biologically related to their stepsons, they have a unique opportunity to show support to their stepsons through the process of “claiming” stepsons as their own (Marsiglio, 2004b). Marsiglio suggests that claiming a stepchild incorporates a state of mind and a strategy for action. He views “claiming” of the stepchild as an important aspect of the stepfather identity. In this study, it seems that claiming also is a way of communicating support to a stepson. The reverse, a stepson’s claiming of his stepfather, also emerged as an important litmus test of the emotional relationship between a youth and his stepfather.

**Claiming a stepson.** One significant way stepfathers showed emotional support to their stepsons was in the process of claiming them as “their own.” Some more actively took part in the claiming process, but for others it happened “naturally,” partly due to the age of the child and partly to other factors. This section presents stepfathers’ views on claiming their stepchildren. It is organized chronologically based on the age of the child when he met the stepfather.
Nick became a stepfather to Christian when he was three years old. Nick told me, “I mean, Christian was so little. He’s – I’ve kinda raised him” (2.02-137). The earliest memory Christian has of Nick was when he married Christian’s mom, which was four years after they had been living together. Nick felt Christian was his own due to the length of their relationship and the fact that Christian was so young when Nick entered into his life. Nick claimed Christian, but he did it passively.

Buck Holland was in a similar situation. Buck explained he had few if any problems in his relationship with Mitchel, mostly because Mitchel was so young when he and Buck first met, “At this point, he feels like just as much a son to me as my own boys, my biological kids do” (6.02-131). Buck went on to tentatively assert from his perspective that, “in some respects, he and I are closer than him and his own dad are” (6.02-131). Buck married Mitchel’s mother when Mitchel was three years old.

Even though Jim Jones entered Jake’s life when he was about five years old, he described his relationship with Jake as “natural” (7.02-128); “Jake really latched on immediately, right away” (7.02-126). Jim recalls, “I just think he needed a man. Since his dad left, he kinda just saw me and just kinda [latched on]” (7.02-126). Jim characterized the relationship as “loving” (7.02-244) and “caring” (7.02-246). Jim said “I mean …, they’re my own kids. And Jake, yeah I see so much of myself in Jake, just because of the time we’ve been together, and I’m not all that’s good of course” (7.02-246). He saw them as his own, even to the point that he saw his actions reflected in Jake.

Claiming Steve was not as natural for Bill Fisher, but nonetheless sincere. Pamela shared that her boys “haven’t always been as accepting of [Bill]” (4.01-171). She posited “obviously he’s not their biological dad, so I’m sure that that’s a factor. But in their own I
think they really are accepting and respectful in that they realize that he’s there for them” (4.01-173). The quality of “being there” for the boys was part of Bill’s emotional support toward Steve. Bill entered Steve’s life just before he started elementary school. He was about five years old when they first met. Bill is adamant that “I have four kids. In my mind, I have four children” (4.02-26). This statement was repeated frequently and demonstrated Bill’s “claiming” of his stepsons.

Karl Weliver said of his stepson, “Well, I always looked at it as – I never look at it as being a stepdad, I always look at it just being Dad” (5.02-196). In his mind there was never a point that he didn’t claim his stepson Evan. Karl loves kids and was excited “just to have another kid that’s younger and go through the experience again is just great. The feeling you get to watch those kids grow up and the things you get to redo you get to live your childhood too” (5.02-196:198). Evan was 6 years old when he met Karl.

Darren Jacobs came into Brad’s life when Brad was 9 years old. Darren felt it was especially important for him to claim Brad because he “never had a Dad so I’m the father figure” (3.02-271). Darren explained that he didn’t want to be “a guy in the house who is married to Mom” (3.02-271). Darren repeated trying to clarify what he meant, “You want him to think you are his Dad because basically I am his Dad. Well I am his Dad. You want him to still feel that you’re his Dad and not stepfather. You know what I mean” (3.02-271)? That Darren said “I am his Dad” was an admission of his role, although it did not fully demonstrate “claiming” of Brad. For Darren his role as “Dad and not stepfather” did not seem to be fully internalized, even though it was a concept he recognized as important. Darren, I think, was in the initial stages of the process of claiming Brad as his own.
For all the stepfathers, claiming their stepsons was one important factor in showing emotional support. There was no striking evidence that the longer a stepfather had been in a stepchild’s life, the more he would claim him. Rather, claiming seemed to be a goal or assumption of every stepfather from early in his relationship with his stepson. In concordance with Marsiglio’s (2004b) observation, stepfathers’ psychological disposition toward their stepsons and their communication with them were part of the process of claiming stepsons.

**Claiming a stepfather.** Stepfathers were not the only ones in these six cases to communicate emotional support. Some stepsons also articulated emotional connection with their stepfathers. Messages of affection were also communicated by stepsons to their stepfathers. One questions I asked all stepfathers is if they could tell me times they knew that their stepsons really appreciated them being involved in their lives. Karl Weliver shared, that sometimes “when we do something that’s fun … he comes up, gives me a big hug, says, ‘I love you Weliver,’ and just holds on to you and you know … the kid’s sincere. … We have moments like that” (5.02-150). Stepson Mitchel Love also told his stepfather Buck “I love you” (6.02-139). Finally Jake Patel expressed words of affection toward his stepfather Jim Jones. In addition to direct words of affection, stepsons also had a powerful option for expressing emotional support: the term “Dad.”

None of the stepsons in these six cases were “required” or “forced” to use the term “Dad” to address their stepfathers. For all of the stepfathers, the term of address was selected by the stepson. It was not forced on him. So, when a stepson did use the moniker “Dad” it held significance for these stepfathers. Buck Holland explained his experience. He related the story that sometimes at a special church encampment week, Mitchel “will
just come up and say, ‘I love you, Dad’” (6.02-139). Buck emphasized that beyond the direct message (“I love you”) he appreciated the term:

I mean he calls me Dad. And that was his choice. I mean I didn’t insist, “You gotta call me Dad,” or anything like that. And initially, he didn’t really have a title for me one way or another. … I was here, and I was in the father role, but at one point, he decided that he wanted to call me Dad. And he just started, and he has ever since (6.02-139).

From Buck’s perspective, it was important that he not “insist” on any particular label, so when Mitchel used the term it was volitional.

Jim Jones shared that his stepsons’ use of the term implied the relationship he has with them. “We’ve never made them call me dad. … You ask any therapist or any lawyer or any judge, you can’t make a kid do anything that they don’t want to do. They say what’s natural to them” (7.02-204). Jim was making the point that his relationship is meaningful because his stepsons called him “Dad” and because kids say “what’s natural to them.” He also is speaking to the broader context of the stepfamily system, particularly that the boys’ biological father dislikes and actively punishes the boys for using the term for Jim. For these stepfathers, when stepsons used the term “Dad” it was judged to be meaningful and symbolic of the emotional connection in their relationship which is contextualized within the broader ecological system surrounding the stepfamily.

Karl Weliver shared that allowing his stepson Evan to be in control of their relationship, including the term he used for Karl, made for a better relationship. “I don’t make him call me Dad, I don’t make him call me Stepdad. I don’t force anything on him. If he feels that’s he’s in control of the relationship I think you’re gonna get more out of
it” (5.02-389) Karl felt special that Evan would “refer to me as, ‘There’s my dad doing this,’ ‘There’s my dad doing that,’ even though he has his regular dad, too” (5.02-23).

Even chose to use the Dad label for Karl and for his biological father. Another term Evan used to refer to Karl was his last name, Weliver. Many people referred to Karl by this name because at his place of work there are three people the same first name. So calling him “Weliver” would be equivalent to calling him by his proper name.

In each of the three cases described above, the stepchildren “claimed” their stepfathers by using the term “Dad.” Mitchel, Jake, and Evan, were obviously accustomed to using this label because it came freely and fluently in their interactions with me and with their stepfathers. This was the case both in public and in the privacy of their homes. As I present in more detail below, these three stepsons all wanted their visitation to their nonresident fathers to remain unchanged (Jake) or to actually decrease (Mitchel and Evan) which also suggests that these youth were willing to spend more time with their stepfathers than with their biological fathers. Given all the data available in observations, interviews, and self-report questionnaires, I judged these three relationships as the most supportive and “natural” of the six stepfather-stepson relationships. Buck Holland and Mitchel Love, Jim Jones and Jake Patel, and Karl Weliver and Evan Brown all shared the common experience of mutually claiming one another, evidenced through their language and displayed in their relationships. That is, the stepsons used the “Dad” label freely and fluently toward their stepfathers while the stepfathers shared that they viewed their stepsons as their own.

The other three stepsons used proper names to refer to their stepfathers. Christian, Nick’s stepson, exclusively referred to his stepdad by his first name. Christian’s mom
Julie explained, “They don’t call him dad or anything because they still have their dad” (2.01-134). Despite the absence of the term, Julie thought, “they depend on Nick a lot, not just for money, but if something were to happen or they need something, they would call him before their dad. He’s really a part in their life” (2.01-134). Likewise, during my interview and observations with Steve, I never heard him refer to Bill by any other name. Despite the fact that both of these stepfathers felt responsibility toward their stepsons and even through Nick and Bill saw themselves as important in their stepsons’ lives, these stepsons did not reciprocate by using the “Dad” label.

In my observational visits with the Jacobs family, I heard Brad use the term “Dad” on only one occasion. It was while Darren’s two biological children were visiting. My fieldnotes record:

Brad let me into the house and told me, “my Dad is showering and my Mom is getting ready.” I noted that Brad used the term “Dad” to refer to Darren because always before I’ve only heard him call Darren by his proper name. Later that same day he made another reference to Darren by the term “dad” or “my dad” (3.7)

Probably most significant in this context was that Brad’s two younger stepsisters, Darren’s biological children, were present and they constantly referred to Darren as “Dad.” It may have been for convenience or clarity that Brad used the label rather than a declaration of emotional connection. Christian, Steve, and Brad did not claim their stepfathers through the nouns of direct address they used.

Each of the stepsons in these six case studies sent messages about their relationship (Waltzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967) when they used or didn’t use the
“Dad” label for their stepfather. Three of the stepsons defined their relationship as fatherly through the use of the label and three did not. Other research, based on interviews with college attending stepchildren, classifies use of terms of address as formal, familiar, and familial to express separateness from stepparent, solidarity with a stepparent, or balance between step and biological parents (Kellas et al., 2008). In this study, stepsons either used familiar terms (first name, stepfather) or familial terms (dad, father). None used formal terms of address (e.g., “my mother’s husband”). The meaning of the terms used by 10-14 year old stepsons seemed less intentional or less controlling than what was reported by Kellas and colleagues, perhaps due to the age difference between samples. Stepsons in this study seemed to use terms for their stepfathers that reflected the quality of their relationships.

**Informational Support**

Informational support is defined by the transfer of knowledge (not necessarily novel information) from a support-provider to the target recipient. Importantly, informational support also includes providing advice and information about how youth ought to live (McNeely & Barber, 2010). Informational support was shown by stepfathers in this study in two main ways. First, stepfathers transferred knowledge from their personal expertise. Sometimes referred to as the transfer of social capital, actively teaching stepsons about various tasks was the first form of informational support. As a second form of informational support identified in this study, stepfathers provided informational support by giving moral guidance or advice to their stepsons. Rather than teaching a specific task or set of tasks, this form of informational support was
characterized by showing stepsons the right way to live, think, act, and be. It was communicated to stepsons in a variety of ways.

**Transferring knowledge.** One important role that stepfathers played which showed support was in teaching their stepsons skills and knowledge about a variety of topics. Some in the research community have termed this process the transfer of *social capital* (for critical review of term, see Morrow, 1999), which is one of the contributions fathers and stepfathers make (independent of mothers) toward children’s wellbeing (Amato & Rivera, 1999). The transfer of social capital took place through stepfathers introducing stepsons to a variety of activities or by involving them on projects stepfathers were conducting. These teaching activities usually occurred in one-on-one settings, potentially doubling as emotional support in addition to informational support.

Darren transferred social capital through an experimental teaching style. Darren adopted his Dad’s philosophy, “If you’re told everything, then you don’t need to go learn it. … But if you have to learn it, you’ll never forget it” (3.02-60). Darren introduced Brad to woodworking, something which “inspired” (3.03-157) Brad to want to be a carpenter. Darren also introduced Brad to a variety of outdoor recreations, such as camping, fishing, and biking. Darren also took Brad hunting for the first time and was with him when he harvested his first deer. Participating in this shared experience gave Darren ample opportunity to teach Brad the “how to’s” of shooting (e.g., aiming, siting the gun) and hunting (e.g., stalking game, positioning, tracking, gutting, skinning, butchering). Darren’s ample experiences with these activities as a boy and in the Marine Corp provide him a deep reservoir of knowledge from which to instruct Brad. Teaching domain
specific knowledge and skills, especially from the stepfather experiences, was an important form of informational support.

Bill Fisher taught Steve how to perform general maintenance on the house. “I’m working on something, he always wants to be right there to help and – sometimes help’s not the best word, is it” (4.02-28)? Regardless of the helpfulness of Steve’s presence, Bill encouraged Steve’s involvement. “Anytime I’m outside doing something, I try to involve Steve in it and try to explain what we’re doing, why we’re doing it” (4.02-87). Bill’s motivation for teaching Steve the how and why of his work came from his experiences as a child. “My dad was handy as all get out. He could build anything in the world he wanted to, but he wouldn’t show you how to do anything” (4.02-87). Bill’s father would take over the project himself, not giving Bill the opportunity to learn from practice. In contrast, Bill said:

I want to show [Steve] how things are done. And this is the way we do things and yes, one nail is good. Fifty nails does not make it 50 times better. I guess that’s – I try to show him and explain to him why things are done the way they are.”

Whereas my dad would just, “Get out of the way and let me do it” (4.02-87) Bill also trained Steve how to do things in an area of his expertise.

Similarly, Karl Weliver wanted to show Evan “everything I know and what I can do.” He clarified. “I see when [Evan] goes to buy a car he’ll probably come to me … because of the mechanical background. When he buys a house and needs help fixing it up … he’ll call me because he sees me tinkering” (5.02-391:392). Karl shared information with Evan that came from his expertise. Jim Jones shared with his stepson knowledge about running, playing video games, and weight lifting, all activities in which he was
experienced. Stepson Jake shared that Jim’s teaching “got me hooked on running and stuff” (7.03-78).

For each of these situations, the stepfather relayed informational support by teaching their stepsons knowledge related to a particular domain. The activities usually occurred in one-on-one settings or group activities where only the stepfather and youth were present, and therefore provided the ability to double as emotional support.

**Moral guidance or advice.** Stepfathers shared advice about how to perform tasks and also were involved in trying to shape their stepchildren’s worldview. They wanted to teach their stepsons how to live, what is right and what is wrong. I asked stepfathers and sons to talk about the life lessons they thought were important to teach or, for the stepsons, what they thought stepfathers deemed was important for them to learn. Their responses show the kind of role the stepfather hoped to have in providing moral guidance to their stepsons. Darren Jacobs believed part of his charge as a stepfather is “Teaching them, I guess as a parent you’re getting them ready for life, basically” (3.02-135). When Jim Jones thought about his role in teaching his stepsons, he mused: “I definitely see myself being his mentor when it comes to maybe fitness and hopefully some personal, life stuff. … I mean I’d like to be his mentor for everything” (7.02-174, emphasis added). What Jim was saying when he talked about wanting to guide stepsons Jared and Jake in “personal, life stuff” is that he wants to play an active role in helping shape their opinions, beliefs, views, and behaviors. Stepfathers in these six cases all sought to influence their stepsons moral formation.

**Content of life lessons.** The life lessons are fairly similar across families. Most want their kids to learn the golden rule: Treat people the way you want to be treated...
(Matthew 7:12). Stepfathers emphasized honesty, respect, fairness, and good manners. These lessons reflect the cultural values held by the broader society in which they live, if not by human societies around the globe. Stepfathers also mentioned wanting to dissuade their stepsons from using drugs, and they wanted their kids to be safe with sex, if they were going to have it. The lessons stepfathers sought to pass down to their stepsons were similar across stepfamilies. They taught the lessons in a variety of ways.

**Ways of teaching.** The ways of teaching life lessons also coalesced around a few key tactics. Modeling was one of the primary ways the six stepfathers in this study talked about their role in providing moral guidance. Other tactics were debriefing experience or seizing teachable moments and involving youth in a church or community organization that reinforced family values.

*Modeling.* I asked Nick King how he tried to teach life lessons to his stepson. He replied, “By example a lot…. Not that I don’t falter sometimes and raise my voice or maybe get lazy here and there, do things like that. But mostly I’m pretty big on [leading by example]” (2.02-215). In my interview with Christian I asked how Nick taught him life lessons. Christian responded “He probably teaches them by showing it to me, like, little examples. Like … if he’s doing something he’d probably want to show it by doing it in a good way not a bad way” (2.03-137).

Part of modeling moral guidance, Karl Weliver thought, came simply from being involved in his kid’s lives. Karl thought that because his father and stepfather were not involved in his life, he “became a troubled child” (5.02-246). He now reasons, “If you love your kids and you’re around and you show them … that’ll steer them from being the bad kid” (5.02-246). Karl thought that modeling was an effective teaching tool for Evan.
He explained, “[Evan] sees how I treat people, he sees how I interact with people at the church, how friendly I am, how outgoing I am, polite, anything that he can see that I’m doing that he’ll pick up on” (5.02-398). Displaying the kind of behavior expected from stepsons was an important way of guiding youth.

Debriefing teachable moments. Sometimes the lessons were taught through debriefing experiences with stepsons. Bill Fisher, for example, took advantage of “teachable moments.” Bill wanted his stepsons to grow to be honest, caring, and non-materialistic. He explained that to teach these lessons, he will answer questions Steve brings up about Bill’s behaviors: “Why did you do that?” “Well, it’s the nice thing to do” (4.02-131). Bill gave a concrete example:

If we’re walking into Walmart and Salvation Army is there and you put some quarters in the little can, well, “Why’d you give them money?” “Well, Steve, they help people that Santa Claus isn’t gonna come see them too much this year. So they help make sure that other boys and girls do have something from Santa under the tree.” “Oh, okay. That’s nice.” He says (4.02-131).

Teachable moments also occurred in “everyday conversations” (6.02-188) according to Buck Holland. As topics were brought up through stories about Mitchel’s school day and in television commercials, the topic generated conversation. Explaining the rationale for stepfathers’ actions helped supplement modeling as a method of communicating informational support.

Community involvement. Another way some of the stepfathers tried to help provide moral guidance to their stepsons was through church involvement. In the Weliver family, Karl explained “Our church is the big thing. We stress that God’s the important
part of our life and direction. We live by His values and what He wants us to do” (5.02-406). For the Holland family, church attendance wasn’t enough, but they wanted to be sure to get involved. The family attended church weekly, Caroline was the church librarian, and Buck volunteered as a leader in the church youth group. They also practiced “regular thing like praying before we eat and things like that to give thanks for what we have” (6.02-196). All of these activities, the Hollands felt, reinforced the life lessons they wanted to teach Mitchel and their other children. The Joneses also participated in church. Sally co-directed a weekly children’s program which Jake attended. Jim Jones volunteered as the recreation coordinator for the program (7.3). Taking part in church and church related activities augmented teaching life lessons.

Participating in the Boy Scouts of America was another way that some of the stepfathers reinforced the lessons they wanted their stepsons to learn. Darren felt that enrolling Brad in Boy Scouts “was the best thing that could ever happen to him” (3.02-265). Boy Scouts “has changed him for the better; getting out and doing things; and getting excited to go do things” (3.02-265). Nick King also saw Boy Scouts as a positive influence in Christian’s life. It taught him important skills as well as how to be responsible. Stepfathers used a variety of tactics to try and teach life lessons to their stepsons. Providing moral guidance as well as teaching domain specific knowledge were both types of informational support stepfathers communicated to stepsons.

**Instrumental Support**

Stepfathers also provided tangible resources to their stepsons, that is, they provided instrumental support. This occurred in three primary ways. First, stepfathers provided for stepsons’ needs, including participating in physical caretaking of their
Second, stepfathers gave their stepsons items they wanted through purchasing gifts or providing allowances for youth to save “their” money for purchases. Finally, stepfathers showed instrumental support by facilitating their stepsons’ participation in activities they enjoyed. This took form in providing rides, introducing youth to new activities, or purchasing equipment needed for an activity.

**Providing for needs.** At a general level, stepfathers participated in providing financially for their stepsons and for their families. Nick King, for example, built the house where the family lives. In the Jacobs family, Darren’s recent employment with the railroad shows the impact of his financial contribution to the household. It enabled them to purchase a house, for example. Providing for their families was an important task for Nick King and Buck Holland who both included this aspect of instrumental support in their sentence completion exercises. Buck and Nick both wrote that not being able to provide for their families was their “greatest fear” (6.02-SR; 2.02-SR). During my interview with Nick, when I asked how he supported stepson Christian, his first words were “In financially supporting, of course, for one thing” (2.02-167). For these men, providing instrumental support was paramount to their role as stepfathers.

In caring for the physical wellbeing of their stepsons, I watched stepfathers do a variety of tasks. I witnessed Jim, Nick, Buck, and Karl all cook meals for their stepsons. Buck helped clean house. Jim was responsible for cleaning dishes after each night’s dinner. Karl helped do his stepson’s task of caring for the family dog. Jim set an appointment, took his sick stepson to the doctor, and provided medicine for him. I also heard one of Jim’s stepsons share a story about a time Jim performed the Heimlich maneuver to dislodge a chunk of meat from his throat. Karl helped his stepson put on his
coat when it was cold outside, and Darren reminded his stepson to get a hat and gloves. All of these examples show different ways that stepfathers took part in caring for the physical needs of their stepsons.

**Providing items youth wanted.** Another way that stepfathers showed instrumental support was in providing stepsons with items they wanted. Sometimes stepfathers purchased gifts for their stepsons. They also provided monetary allowances to their stepsons or assigned chores which resulted in payment. Because many of my observational visits occurred around the Christmas holiday and all the families practiced gift giving over the holiday, I was able to see gifts given to stepsons in all families. In the Weliver family, I visited shortly after Christmas and was given a show-and-tell of all the gifts Evan received (5.2). Everyone in the family received a Nurf gun which they would use to have a huge Nurf war. Karl told me he loved “running around like a four year old” and playing Nurf wars with the kids” (5.2). In the Fisher family, Bill was excited to give Steve a combination miniature air hockey and pool table (see Figure 5.3).

![Figure 5.3. Fisher family Christmas present for Steve.](image)

Because of his stepson’s interest in outdoor recreation, Darren purchased equipment for Brad. For example, Darren shared that he purchased a compound bow for Brad to use during Bow Hunting Season. Darren’s father, Pap, also was involved in
supplying Brad with equipment to use in outdoor recreation. This example illustrates that not only was the stepfather a source of instrumental support, his family also took part. The present was given at Pap’s house in the downstairs basement. My fieldnotes describe the scene:

Brad borrowed Darren’s pocket knife to cut into a cardboard box and unveil the present. It was a north face ruck sac. “He’s been using Darren’s old pack,” Pap told me. Darren chimed in “I’ve had it since high school and haven’t changed much in size since.” Darren was indicating that the pack was obviously too big for Brad. Because “we do a lot of stuff outdoors,” the ruck sack was a very pragmatic gift. Both Darren and Pap told Brad that he’d be able to carry a lot more weight with this pack because it fit him so much better and it would be much more comfortable than the other pack he had been carrying. Darren’s dad told Brad “when you’re done with it, it will be your brother’s” and ‘future decisions will be based on how you take care of this pack’. What Pap told Brad meant that he would be watching the way he treated the equipment and expected him to take good care of it. After opening the gift, Darren and Pap found a sleeping bag to stuff into the bottom pocket of the pack (3.1).

Stepfather Darren purchased gifts for Brad as did Brad’s stepgrandfather, Pap.

Besides giving gifts, I saw one example of a time a stepfather gave up something which belonged to him. The setting was at a church after a children’s program. Children and adult supervisors were sitting in age-groups around about a dozen round tables in a large, open room. Along one wall was an opening in the wall that connected to the
kitchen. I was sitting at a table with Jim and Jake along with about 6 other 10 and 11 year old boys. My fieldnote entry describes what happened:

At the end of the meal, Jim distributed cookies to everyone. He went around the table and gave each person one cookie. When he got to Jake, he gave him two and said “Here you go, Jake. I’m not having one.” Jake was excited and a little later said “I have two cookies ‘cause my dad gave me one. I’m happy” (7.3).

Jim provided Jake a small token of his affection, one cookie. However, because there were not enough cookies for other kids to have two each, it was a scarce resource in that particular context. Jim’s giving up of his cookie was evaluated by Jake as a valuable resource. Moreover, the gift was public. It showed how Jim prized his stepson over the other boys present.

**Facilitating enjoyable activities.** Stepfathers were also involved in trying to accommodate stepsons’ desires to participate in a variety of activities. This took the form of providing rides, introducing youth to new activities, or purchasing what is needed to participate in the activity. Nick King, for example, took Christian to and from bi-weekly Boy Scout meetings. When I asked Christian how he knew Nick supported him, his reply was “Well, he’ll usually go places with me, like Scouting stuff, he’ll usually go with me” (2.03-93). Providing a ride gave Christian the opportunity to participate, something he enjoyed doing.

During one visit to the home I learned about a recent outing Nick and Christian had made with the Scouts. One of the men involved with their Boy Scout Troop worked at the YMCA and set up a rock climbing trip for the boys:
Nick reported, ‘Christian did real well. Made it all the way to the top. He even made it up an inverted wall a bit.’ Nick’s encouragement was given while Christian was sitting in the same room. Julie suggested that Nick show me the pictures, so Nick procured his digital camera and let me scroll through the pictures he had taken of the event. Nick then shared how the boys and the adult chaperones then played a couple games of dodge ball. Nick teasingly asked Christian to share how the boys won. Christian chuckled, shyly and just said “we won.” Nick chimed in that “they cheated, that’s how they won.” He explained how he thought the boys cheated while Christian smiled and chuckled. They had a friendly rivalry over the dodge ball game. The broader point of the trip, however, is that Nick and Christian shared an enjoyable activity together. When I asked if Julie had attended, she shared that she and Suzanne had driven to [town] with Nick and Christian, but then dropped them off at the YMCA while the two ladies went shopping. Their actions established that BSA was Nick and Christian’s thing to do together (2.7).

The event also was a way Nick provided instrumental support to Christian, facilitating his involvement in an enjoyable activity.

For Darren, introducing Brad to Boy Scouts was a way of facilitating something enjoyable. Scouts introduced Brad to new skills and activities, and Brad liked many of them. For example, Darren reported, “[Brad] loves climbing, rock climbing and repelling. He fell in love with that” (3.02-189). I asked if there were any opportunities in the area for Brad to go climbing and Darren shared that he was trying to arrange a climbing trip
for Brad through a friend of Darren’s father. Using his social network to facilitate an enjoyable activity was a way that Darren expressed instrumental support.

Another way a stepfather showed support was in providing what was needed for the youth to doing something fun. Buck Holland shared an example of when he purchased his stepson tickets to a college basketball game (6.02-154. The day of the game was an enjoyable and memorable experience for Mitchel. It was made possible through the purchase of tickets.

In the Jones family I also witnessed an event where stepfather Jim facilitated Jake’s participation in an enjoyable activity. It was Jake’s birthday party. Sally had decorated and made a special desert for Jake (see Figure 5.4). Six of Jake’s friends had gathered for the party. Daniel, Jake’s 12 year old stepbrother, had loaded all the Nurf guns in the house and arranged a small arsenal of guns along the couch in the family den (see Figure 5.5). The story, depicted in field notes, picks up just before the Nurf battle began:

Figure 5.4. Jones family decorations for Jake’s birthday party.
Jim set a timer to get the game initiated. He told the kids the first round would begin in just a minute. He then set the microwave as a timer that would beep. It was 6:57pm when the beep signaled the beginning of the game that would later be described as “epic” by one of the boys. Jim monitored the game from the kitchen. After 4 minutes of the boys laughing and shooting each other with Nurf guns, Jim said “I’m calling a reload.” As the boys picked up Nurf darts and went to their separate rooms to load, Jim gave one of the teams (not Jake’s team) some advice, “if it were me,” he prefaced, he would advance from both sides and “flank” them. Sally commented on his advice and he said something like ‘it’s the military in me.’ The second round began. It lasted, I think, until around 7:10 or 7:15p. About 7:20p, Jim, who had wondered into the formal living room (where Jake’s team had “base”), came out with a Nurf gun fully loaded and a second clip with Nurf darts. He shot all the boys from the high ground near the table. They enjoyed this, shouting about how they were hit and enacting their “death” scenes in slow motion. After this, someone called for kids versus Adults. … I joined in the game and Sally clarified, “only armed adults,” since she did not play. We shot each
other with Nurf darts and played for another 20 minutes or so. There were a couple of rounds more before Nurf wars settled into throwing darts instead of reloading the guns. There was a plastic sword also used in the war in addition to pillows. The boys eventually were tackling each other and holding one another hostage. In the midst of the noise, I could make out phrases like “I’ve got him at gunpoint” and the like. They boys definitely had fun. Around 7:47p the war was over. Jim called to the boys and had them help clean up. This was mostly unsuccessful, and Jim and I ended up picking up most of the darts from around the house (7.5).

Serving as referee, Jim facilitated an “epic” Nurf battle. It was an activity that he shared with Jake and it was something that he provided instrumental support by purchasing (over time) a variety of Nurf guns and ammunition.

Instrumental support in these stepfamilies took place through general provision and contribution to the household economy. It also took form in providing physical nurture for stepsons, providing things stepsons wanted, and facilitating participation in enjoyable activities. To be sure, many of these types of instrumental support potentially doubled as informational or emotional support. The classifications are fuzzy. For example, when stepfathers facilitated youths’ involvement in enjoyable activities, in many cases they also participated with their youth. Co-participating in activities can be a form of emotional support. Linking various forms of support (e.g., sharing activities with moral guidance) was an important way of reinforcing the identity of the stepfathers through shared actions and activities.
Micro Support Messages

In addition to the broad categories of emotional, informational, and instrumental support described above, I also witnessed myriad instances of micro support messages (MSM). Micro support messages (MSM) are the actual words, phrases, gestures, touch, and other behaviors and artifacts which send emotional, informational, and instrumental messages. Micro support occurred almost constantly during stepfather-stepson interactions. Micro support was often communicated nonverbally through touch, proximity and gestures, or quickly in single words and short phrases: “good job,” “not there,” “that’s the way,” “are you ready?” “don’t quit now.” Some micro support messages were difficult to classify into a single “type” of social support because during interactions messages generally toggled rapidly among the various types of support. As an example of how micro support messages operated, consider an interactive episode where a stepfather is giving directions to his stepsons about how to perform particular tasks. Directions were laden with opinions on how things “should” or “ought” be done. They functioned effectively as a socialization mechanism. Giving directions or advice on completing a task might seem like an obvious type of informational support. In one phrase, however, the directions might be informational support teaching the stepson how to complete a particular aspect of a specific task while the next phrase might be classified as emotional support where the stepfather praises the stepson for a good job. The next moment a stepfather might warn his stepson to keep him from making a mistake. In this way, MSM were quickly communicated and moved rapidly from one type of support to the next during a particular interactive episode.
Everyday encounters of micro support were important because as they accumulated over time, they served to define the nature of support in the relationship. If the balance of MSM sent during any given interaction were instructional, then the characteristic of that particular interactive episode will likely be a type of informational support. If micro support messages toggle between praise and encouragement and instruction, the overall relationship will likely be characterized by warmth (emotional support) and teaching (informational support). Through micro support messages, stepfathers developed patterns of particular types of messages which eventually as they accumulated, characterized the nature of supportive communication in their relationships. This broader relational level of support, in turn, was part of the culture of support.

Two examples from fieldnotes illustrate how micro support messages were sent to stepsons. The first involves the incident described above as a type of instrumental support where Darren provided things Brad wanted (3.1). The story describes when Darren’s father, Pap, gave Brad a NorthFace ruck sac for a birthday present. During the interactive episode, a number of micro support messages were communicated. When Brad opened a birthday present, to cut the tape Darren offered his pocket knife for Brad’s use. This was a form of instrumental support, enabling Brad to accomplish a task. The act served as a form of informational support communicating that using a knife to open a box is appropriate and preferred to ripping into the box. During the conversation about Brad’s birthday present, Darren shared a few stories – some of which Brad knew well because he told parts of them – which conveyed information about how to properly use backpacking equipment, how one ought treat equipment, and general rules for living. Because Pap and Brad were going on a backpacking trip the following weekend, the gift was very
pragmatic, having instrumental support message value. Brad would be “breaking in” the backpack that weekend, so after opening it Brad also grabbed a backpacker’s sleeping bag from the stock of equipment on Pap’s basement shelves. Pap and Darren both gave directions (informational support, teaching) on how to stuff the sleeping bag into the new ruck sac. They told him where it should go and why it is best placed in that location of the backpack. Brad was the one to fetch the sleeping bag and to stuff it into the ruck sac (reflecting the experimental training method preferred by Darren and learned from Pap). The micro support messages in this example tended toward instruction; but, at a general level giving the backpack was a type of instrumental support. Whereas this first example demonstrates the complexity and number of MSM sent during any given interactive episode, the next example demonstrates more clearly how micro support messages served to impact the stepfather son relationship.

Examining micro support messages also helps explain Bill Fisher’s relationship with Steve. Understanding what Bill communicated through micro support messages may even provide the reason why even though Bill claimed Steve, it was not reciprocated in Steve’s vernacular of addressing Bill as Dad. Even though Bill was active in pursuing Steve’s affinity through his interactions, he also was continually directing and correcting Steve. In his sentence completion exercise, Steve wrote “One thing I can’t stand is – bossy people” (4.03-SR). Later in the same exercise, Steve wrote, “Stepdad’s sometimes - are bossy” (4.03-SR). Steve’s perception of Bill as “bossy” derived from his interpretation of micro support messages he received during some of his interactions with Bill.
In one particular set of fieldnotes with the Fisher family (4.4), my observations confirm how several micro support messages illustrated the dynamic between Steve and Bill’s relationship. To set the scene, Bill had just arrived home from work when he received a phone call which would require him to immediately leave the house again. Pamela volunteered to go for him and left. Sam was upstairs and did not appear in my observations. Steve was excited because it was Monday and his Thanksgiving break from school started the following day. As Pam walked out the door, Steve asked if he could play the Wii which was located in the basement in the family “game room.” Steve went downstairs to set up the Wii and I went with him:

A short while later, Bill came into the room and joined Steve. They played a game called “tanks” and a “fishing” game and a “cow racing” game—all part of the same CD. They played these games together. A couple of noteworthy incidents during the game play were that Steve “poked” Bill’s avatar in the nose, to which Bill said “Don’t make him pick my nose” and then Steve “poked” Bill’s avatar in the “sensitive areas” (as Bill described it to Pam later after she came home). Bill scolded Steve for doing this indicating that it was inappropriate. Steve protested that it was okay.

Throughout the game play, Steve would do things and Bill would instruct, tease, and encourage. I’m not sure what to quite make of the communication (the messages Bill was sending and how Steve perceived these messages.) Bill said some things to indicate his lack of skill in the games. He also said things like “you’re the expert” when they were bowling and in the next breath “I’m not sure I
want to take you to the bowling ally if you roll the ball into the crowd)” (in response to Steve’s actions in the Wii game) He said ‘Maybe it’s good you didn’t go to so-and-so’s bowling party’. It was a mixed bag of messages from Bill to Steve. Steve seemed not to notice too much. He gloated in the fact that he was winning and that Bill’s avatar shrunk smaller and smaller as Steve’s grew bigger as he won more games (4.4).

Bill nearly constantly directed and corrected Steve, but simultaneously Bill’s actions enabled Steve to play at all. For example, immediately before this scene, the battery on the Wii was dead and Bill procured fresh batteries for Steve. Similarly immediately following this scene, Bill helped Steve put the Wii controller into a steering wheel accessory so that Steve could play a monster truck game. Bill also let Steve select which games to play throughout the episode. On top of it all, Bill had completed the game room last year as a present for Sam and Steve and the Nintindo Wii was a gift. At a general level, then, Bill provided instrumental support which enabled Steve to play the Wii. At a macro level, his instrumental support was mixed with constant micro informational support messages about what and how to play the game and micro emotional support messages encouraging Steve in game play. This “mixed bag” of micro and macro support messages resulted in a relationship which was categorized by Steve with mixed feelings.

Micro support messages are the mechanism through which support is communicated. They are sent rapidly and continually during interactive episodes between stepfathers and stepsons. Micro support messages include all types of support (emotional, informational, and instrumental). During any given interactive episode, the micro support messages may conflict or build on one another. Individual MSM may or may not be
consequential in a relationship however through the summation of MSM, the stepfather-stepson support is determined.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have presented a cross case analysis of supportive communication between stepfathers and their stepsons. I have presented practices and processes in stepfather-stepson relationships which, at a relational level, are construed as emotional support, informational support, or instrumental support. Praising, encouraging or showing affection, both verbally and nonverbally, as well as spending time together one-on-one and with the entire family worked to communicate emotional support. Claiming stepsons also was deemed supportive. The use of the “dad” label was another practice of support from stepson to stepfather, but it was also an important gauge of the emotional relationship as perceived by the stepson. Informational support took form in teaching skills to stepsons and training them for life. Stepfathers communicated social capital and provided moral guidance. Contributing income to the household was one part of instrumental support, but it was not the only way stepfathers practiced this type of support. Stepfathers also provided tangible care for their stepsons, gave stepsons things they wanted, and facilitated stepson participation in enjoyable activities. Finally, this section presented how micro support messages (MSM) toggled among the three types of support during any given interactive episode. Taken together, MSM serve to define and refine the stepfather-stepson relationship.

Classifying a particular stepfather-stepson relationship as supportive or not requires attention to each of these types of support, particularly the micro support messages. No single type of support (emotional, informational, instrumental) generates a
stepfather-stepson relationship, but put together through combinations of micro support messages, the relationship is formed and maintained. Micro support messages are essentially the “report” (Waltzlawick et al., 1967) aspect of a given message which serves to define or redefine the relationship between interlocutors. Each MSM has a value in the relationship. In isolation a single MSM may or may not be consequential; en mass they are the relationship. This is the premise of Duck’s (1995) idea that everyday talk constitutes a relationship. It is the summation of MSM that defines the stepfather-stepson relationships. Just as a single thread wrapped around a person cannot contain them but when the threads wrapped repeatedly around and around and around, they become an inflexible cocoon, so too through repeated patterns of MSM, a stepfather-stepson relationship is constructed, modified, and sealed.
Chapter 6: Model of Support

In this chapter, I present a conceptual model of support synthesizing lessons learned from the within and cross case analyses. As I have presented, each stepfather-stepson pair consisted of a unique relational culture of support embedded within a unique stepfamily system. The relational culture of support is attributed based on observations about individual, relational, and family beliefs and behaviors. The six family cultures developed on personal and collective histories as well as internal and external family factors. The cultures help define and are defined by the role of the stepfather, attitudes and expectations of family members, and relational and family actions or rituals. Relational cultures help clarify what counts as supportive in each stepfamily system.

After presenting within case analysis of each unique culture of support, I turned to a cross case analysis of practices and processes of support. In this chapter I overviewed how these six stepfathers communicated emotional, informational, and instrumental support. I examined verbal expressions of praise, encouragement, and affection. I also looked at nonverbal messages which communicated emotional support. I examined how stepfathers in the different stepfamilies talked about “claiming” their stepsons. Further, I presented how stepsons used the “Dad” label to claim their stepfathers. Informational support, as I presented, was largely tied to transferring social capital or providing moral guidance. Stepfathers actively steered their stepsons into what they considered proper ways of thinking, acting, and being. For the six stepfathers in this study, instrumental support meant providing for household needs (e.g., groceries, clothing, place to live, etc.) as well as caring, giving, and enabling. Finally, support was communicated through micro support messages – words or phrases or nonverbal actions which rapidly toggled
among various types of support. Micro support messages were the nitty-gritty of supportive stepfather-stepson communication and in aggregate served to define the relationship.

Building on the previous two sections, in this section I present a conceptual model of supportive stepfather-stepson relationships. The model proposed here identifies how the stepfather-stepson culture of support in each stepfamily interfaces with support messages in order to create a supportive or unsupportive stepfather-stepson relationship. The model takes into account various actors (e.g., stepfather, son, nonresident father), integrates the concept of culture of support, and suggests a mechanism for creating supportive relationships. Elements of the model and their relationships to supportive communication draw on six patterns which occurred across cases. I first expound on these six patterns and then present the model.

Cross Case Patterns

In this section I identify six patterns that emerged from looking at the communication of support across the six case studies. The first four patterns applied most directly to the stepfather and the final two applied to the stepson. Whereas the first five patterns may apply to other family situations, the final pattern relates most specifically to stepfamily systems where a nonresident father is involved.

Default type of support. One pattern that persisted across cases was that each stepfather seemed to default to one principle type or combination of types of support over the others. In essence, the stepfather-stepson relational cultures of support reported in the chapter four detail the types of support privileged by each stepfather. One way of
assessing the default type of support given by each stepfather is to consider the role the stepfather played in the family system.

From their review of research on stepfathers and stepfamily dynamics, Ganong and Coleman (2004) present a typology of stepfather roles. They propose that stepfathers fill the role of father, friend, quasi-kin, or intimate strangers. Aspects of the stepfathers as father role, according to Ganong and Coleman, may include befriending stepchildren, disciplining them, and providing for them. Compared with the other roles, however, stepfathers as fathers were not as keen to befriend stepchildren as they were to establish their place of authority and provider in the stepfamily. These stepfathers may be engaged to varying degrees in all three types of support – emotional, informational, and instrumental – but likely privilege informational and instrumental support over emotional support. According to their review, most stepfathers attempt to be like fathers in their relationships with stepchildren, perhaps many without any forethought or planning.

The second type of stepfather role is that of friend. Friendly stepfathers attempt to create supportive relationships, have fun, and respond to the stepchild’s lead in developing the relationship. Friendly stepfathers are not involved in disciplinary responsibilities. These stepfathers would likely privilege emotional support over the other types.

In the third type of role, stepfathers as quasi-kin, men “define their role as being something between a father and a friend” (Ganong & Coleman, 2004, p. 132). Thus, quasi-kin stepfathers attempt to both befriend and have fun with the stepchild while simultaneously assuming responsibilities of provision and discipline. Quasi-kin stepfathers likely engaged in all three types of support, particularly with high levels of
emotional support. The difference between stepfathers as fathers and stepfathers as quasi-kin is the intentionality of befriending a stepchild, which likely is communicated through emotional support.

The final type of role for stepfathers is that of an intimate stranger. This role for stepfathers involves remaining “emotionally remote” and “relatively uninvolved” in caring for their stepchildren (Ganong & Coleman, 2004, p. 133). This type of stepfather would likely be low in emotional and informational support and primarily provide instrumental support.

In this study, I categorized stepfathers into three of the four types. These types are presented in Table 6.1. Stepfathers in this study acted as father, friend, and quasi-kin. In three stepfamilies I judged the stepfathers to be filling the role of father. One stepfather filled the role of friend and two others the role of quasi-kin. Interestingly, the three stepfamilies with the longest co-residence were the ones I felt fulfilled the role of father. Perhaps as relationships and patterns of interaction stabilize over time, the stepfather role gravitates toward the father role, even when a biological father remains active in the youth’s life. Note too that stepfathers I judged to be friend or quasi-kin, both categories which are characterized by high levels of emotional support, were also judged to be continuous affinity-seekers (discussed below). This seems logical because affinity is characteristic of friendship. That is, vying for friendship and emotional connection requires ongoing relationship investment whereas providing informational or instrumental support is less tied to stepson affinity. In sum, the role the stepfathers in this study played in the life of their stepsons helped characterize the type of support they privileged.
Table 6.1
Stepfathering Behaviors and Stepson Evaluations by Family Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>The Kings</th>
<th>The Jacobs</th>
<th>The Fishers</th>
<th>The Welivers</th>
<th>The Hollands</th>
<th>The Joneses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stepfather Type</strong></td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Quasi-kin</td>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Quasi-kin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Affinity Seeking</strong></td>
<td>Nonseeker</td>
<td>Nonseeker</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
<td>Early</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Co-parent</strong></td>
<td>Little/none Cooperative</td>
<td>Little/none</td>
<td>Parallel /Confictual</td>
<td>Cooperative</td>
<td>Little/none Cooperative</td>
<td>Parallel /Confictual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Terminology</strong></td>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>Darren/Dad*</td>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>Dad/Weliver</td>
<td>Dad</td>
<td>Dad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stepson Overall Relationship Evaluation</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length of Co-residence</strong></td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: This table classifies stepfathers according to their role in the stepfamily, their affinity-seeking behaviors, and their co-parental relationships and provides two types of relationship evaluations as well as approximate length of co-residence.

*Brad used “Dad” term only during one in-home observation and the only time when Darren’s biological children were present.*
Although the pattern was evident to some extent in each of the families, it was most pronounced in two families: the Jacobs family and the Jones family. In the Jacobs family, Darren filled the role of father. In this role, he privileged informational support; he was keen to teach Brad life lessons. His emotional support was tied to activities where he could teach more than verbal or nonverbal affection, encouragement, or praise. Even when Darren shared praise with Brad it was contextualized by “good job, so let’s go do something fun” (see 3.02-244). Much of Darren’s instrumental support was also tied to his aim of teaching Brad. He purchased Brad a compound bow in order to facilitate Brad hunting. Darren’s father bought a ruck sac that fit Brad’s body frame in order to maximize his ability while backpacking, an activity Darren endorsed. In this way, Darren’s desire to train Brad, to provide informational support and to get him “ready for life” (3.02-135), overshadowed other aspects of support.

In the Jones family, Jim sought to be emotionally connected with his stepsons, which fits with the idea that a quasi-kin stepfather seeks to befriend his stepson. Jim was the most consistent in giving his stepsons hugs and telling them “I love you” every day (7.02-244). Instrumental support was wielded in a way to maximize Jim’s connection with Jake. When he gave Jake a cookie, providing Jake with something he wanted, Jim reaped emotional connection as a reward (7.3). When I commented that Jim seemed to have lot of fun with stepson Jake, he replied “Maybe too much fun if you ask Sally” (7.02-248). He continued to share that his unwillingness to “be the mean one” is a source of stress in his marriage, “but I guess being raised in a very strict environment, I was as a kid, it’s kind of why I’m the way I am now, I don’t want to be like that” (7.02-248). Jim instead privileged emotional connection.
Both of these examples indicate that stepfathers tended toward a particular type of support. It is likely that stepfathers have psychological defaults when it comes to communicating support developed from their own experiences receiving social support across their lifespan, their attitudes toward family life, and their views on their roles in their stepfamily.

Motivation. The second pattern which emerged in the cross case analysis of support was the pivotal role of motivation. The stepfathers all expressed, to one degree or another, some internal drive to father. Darren shared that being a stepfather in his first marriage “sped up me wanting to have kids,” even though he’s “always said I wanted to have enough to do colors in the morning! As long as we have enough to put the flag up in the morning” (3.02-81) Jim’s only take-away from his first marriage was his son. “I’d come home from work and [my wife would] go out with her friends, so it [was] just kinda hanging out anyway. So the only thing that I wanted out of the marriage was [my son]” (7.02-84). Karl Weliver was also highly motivated. He explained “You don’t get many opportunities. You become 40 and I’m lucky to have Evan as ten. … so it’s great” (5.02-200). Karl viewed himself as lucky he had the chance to be a stepfather. He saw stepfathering as an opportunity to relive the years of rearing a youth. He went on to share “I was in the fire service so I dealt with kids all the time in medical but it was nice to have him come along and grow up with” (5.02-200). This motivation to have children and rear them was a key to supportive stepfathering.

One way to assess the motivation of stepfathers to support their stepsons is to consider the tenacity and consistency with which stepfathers pursued friendship with their stepsons. One study has identified a typology of stepfathers’ supportive orientations
based on the way stepparents in 17 stepfamilies, 15 of which were stepfather-mother families, sought the affinity of their stepchildren: *nonseekers, early affinity seekers, and continuous affinity seekers* (Ganong et al., 1999). I labeled each stepfather’s affinity-seeking behaviors based on my evaluation of the data, hopefully an evaluation shared by those who read the description of the cases and understand the categories identified in the typologies. Table 6.1 includes the types of affinity seekers stepfathers in this study as well as two measure of relationship evaluation. Reflecting on their analysis of affinity seeking patterns, Ganong and Coleman (2004) state that when affinity seeking strategies are employed stepchildren like their stepparent more and that “affinity-seeking efforts need to be *maintained* for them to be most effective” (p. 125).

Findings from this study confirm as well as complicate this view of stepfather affinity seeking. Stepfathers who seemed to adopt a father role also were on the low end of the affinity-seeking continuum. That is, Nick King, Darren Jacob, and to a somewhat lesser extent Buck Holland did not continuously seek the affinity of their stepsons. I noticed these men also played the role of father in the family. Three other stepfathers (Bill Fisher, Karl Weliver, and Jim Jones), on the other hand, continuously sought the affinity of their stepsons. These stepfathers tried to fill the role of quasi-kin or friend as opposed to the father role. From my vantage point, stepfathers sought the affinity of their stepsons consistent with their roles. That is, their motivation to befriend their stepson corresponded with their role in the household.

What complicates the findings is how affinity-seeking behaviors correspond to stepsons’ evaluations of the relationship. Ganong et al. found that nonseekers had a distant relationship with stepchildren. In that study, early affinity seekers, characterized
by initial but not sustained efforts to seek affinity, had either a close or distant relationship. Finally, continuous affinity seekers, marked by sustained efforts to gain stepchild affinity, generally had close relationships with stepchildren.

In order to see how stepfather roles and stepfather affinity seeking orientations corresponded with youth perceptions in the current data, I inserted two types of relationship evaluations. First, one item in the self-report questionnaire asked youth to report the overall relationship quality with their stepfathers. Answers potentially ranged from 1 to 10. This provided one way to assess the relationship. Another relationship assessment was the terminology youth used to address their stepfathers which I observed across visits with each family.

Juxtaposing these measures of the relationship with the types of affinity seeking behaviors does not fit neatly with the idea that continual affinity seeking necessarily leads to a better relationship quality. Bill Fisher, for example, engaged in continuous affinity seeking behaviors but Steve used the term “Bill” to address him. Buck Holland, on the other hand, seemed to fit the early affinity seeker category but stepson Mitchel referred to him as “Dad.” And, even though Nick King adopted a father role and I judged him to be a nonseeker, Christian evaluated their overall relationship as positive, 7 out of 10. The pattern for affinity seeking behaviors does not correspond perfectly with stepsons’ evaluations of the relationship. It makes intuitive sense that continuous seekers are rewarded, and this is likely the general trend. It applied to two out of three continuous seekers in this study. But, even in the original study by Ganong et al. (1999), one of the continuous affinity seekers did not have the highest quality relationship with his/her stepchild. The exceptions to the pattern indicate that the stepfather-stepson relationship is
more complex than a simple function of affinity seeking behaviors. In other words, although stepfather motivation to father a stepson is important, it does not fully account for the quality of the relationship. More generally, however, examining affinity-seeking behaviors testifies to the extent to which stepfathers were motivated in their role.

**Fathering experience.** Another pattern which persisted across cases was that stepfathers integrated their past fathering experiences into their role as stepfathers. These past experiences included their relationships and memories from being fathered as well as their experiences as biological fathers to other children. In these cases, all six stepfathers fathered biological children prior to stepfathering the youth in this study. Stepfathers Nick King and Darren Jacobs clearly tried to incorporate aspects of their childhood and lessons learned from their fathers into their stepfathering enterprise. Bill Fisher took lessons from how his parents raised him and sought to do things differently, both with his biological children who were 26 and 23 at the time of the study and his stepchildren who were 17 and 10. Karl Weliver also treated Evan similarly to how he treated his own biological kids, practicing similar rituals for example. Buck Holland and Jim Jones also drew from experiences parenting their own biological children. Buck, for example, incorporated into his stepfamily a tradition called “Cookie Fest” which he began while a single, nonresident father. In fact, I was able to observe the tenth annual cookie fest event, which brought together Buck’s biological children, members of the stepfamily household, and numerous friends to make, bake, decorate, and eat a variety of cookies (6.3) (see Figure 6.1). Jim felt that he learned a great deal from Sally about things he was doing incorrectly in parenting Daniel. So for him, merging households corrected and expanded his fathering experience. The pattern across cases was clear: stepfathers’
experiences with their own fathers and as fathers contributed to their understanding and skill in their role.

Figure 6.1. Holland family Cookie Fest tradition.

Social capital. Whereas fathering experience refers to the amount of time and experience the stepfather had being fathered or being a father, social capital was one aspect of each stepfathers’ life experience which was communicated to their stepsons. The transfer of social capital was domain specific and was defined by the stepfathers’ area of expertise. Karl Weliver involved Evan in “tinkering” projects. Jim Jones taught Jake how to run. Darren showed Brad how to shoot a gun. Stepfathers were limited to communicating social capital by the “capital” they possessed, which was largely defined by their past experiences, interests, and hobbies. Instrumental support also was often tied to these interests and hobbies via purchasing equipment needed to complete these activities.

What is interesting about this pattern is not that stepfathers shared from their experiences but that stepsons, on the whole, were responsive to this transfer of social capital. Brad “loves” (3.02-168) being outdoors, and during our interview he shared that many of the activities to which Darren introduced him were his favorite things to do. Steve put in his sentence completion exercise that “My stepdad and I – work on stuff,”
(4.03-SR), indicating that involving him in work projects was a salient feature of their relationship. Evan told me during our interview that he got really excited when he learned that he and Karl were going to build something together (5.03-46). Christian also was receptive to participating in Boy Scouts, which provided him opportunities to do activities with his stepfather Nick. Jake also quickly picked up Jim’s hobbies. He began playing World of Warcraft and he took up running. Mitchel also responded to Buck Holland’s interest and participation in church. Mitchel’s progress and participation made Buck proud. These examples illustrate that each of the six stepsons in these cases responded positively to his stepfather’s offer to share his interests, hobbies and skills.

These first four patterns related most closely to stepfathers. They tended to communicate one type of support over other types, consistent with their role in the stepfamily system. Stepfathers expressed differing levels of motivation to support their stepsons. They incorporated their experiences being fathered as well as fathering other children into their role as stepfathers. And, stepfathers transferred social capital to their stepsons. The final two patterns relate most closely with stepsons.

**Perceived need.** A fifth trend that emerged across multiple cases was that stepsons considered stepfathers’ actions supportive when they corresponded with a stepson’s needs or wants; if the stepson viewed something as needed, it was valued as supportive. This finding aligns with McNeely and Barber’s (2010) proposal that when parents share a valued and scarce resource with their child, it is considered as a way of showing love. In my interview with Christian, I asked how he knew that “Nick cares about you or supports you or something like that” (2.03-92). He replied by stating, “Well, he’ll usually go places with me, like Scouting stuff, he’ll usually go with me. And then
every once in a while we’ll go out to eat” (2.03-93). Both of these activities, especially going out to eat, were things Christian enjoyed. When Mitchel thought about support, he mentioned times that Buck helped him with his homework. Doing well in school was important to Mitchel (he was taking an academic decathlon class at school as an elective!), so the fact that Buck took time to help Mitchel was significant; it was valued as supportive. What Jake valued was doing things. He contrasted a bad stepfather with his stepdad Jim. “There might be some parents out there … who don’t do anything, but that’s the total opposite of [Jim]” (7.03-69, emphasis added). To Jake, the key to being a good stepfather was doing things, especially things Jake enjoyed like video games and running. Evan’s idea of supportive relationship was tied to co-residence: “I just care if I have a dad or not” (5.03-60). Evan’s statement is profound because his biological father is still alive, calls him every day, and sees Evan about two weekends a month. Yet, for Evan, this arrangement does not provide him a “Dad” in the same way that residing with Karl does. Karl was supportive in Evan’s mind because he fulfilled Evan’s perceived need to “have a dad.” Brad felt supported when Darren took him hunting. Steve felt supported when Bill played video games or watched TV, both favorite activities for Steve. Across cases, when stepfathers did things which lined up with their stepson’s desires, it was considered supportive.

Nonresident experiences. The first five patterns identified are likely not unique to stepfathers. All parents likely emphasize one type of support over another; indeed, relationships can be defined by overt communication patterns (e.g., Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996). Motivation and knowledge (social capital) are important aspect of all interpersonal relationships (Heider, 1958). Likewise, many of us all draw from our own experiences
and what we have witnessed in order to address novel situations (cf. Bandura, 1977).

Similarly, that stepchildren value stepfather actions which meet a need or fulfill a desire as supportive, is likewise a phenomenon which applies to parents around the world (McNeely & Barber, 2010). The last pattern, however, is something experienced most uniquely for stepfamilies and relates to stepchildren alternating between living with their stepfather and their biological father.

All but one youth (Brad in the Jacobs family) had contact with their biological fathers in nonresident households. Visitations occurred once a week or once every other week. It is important to keep in mind that when youth visited their nonresident fathers, it implied visiting an entirely different family system (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Of the five youth who had contact with their biological fathers, all of their biological fathers were repartnered. Some had half siblings and others had stepsiblings who lived with their biological fathers. There were also biological grandparents and other extended family members who youth in this study saw on their weekend visitations. Coping with the effects of alternating households was something each of the stepfamilies except the Jacobs family faced. Three implications of alternating households were evident.

Fluctuating household composition. First, because youth alternated between households, the specific composition of the nonresidential households as well as the stephouseholds fluctuated. Stepchildren visited nonresidential father households and nonresidential biological children of the stepfathers visited the stepfamily. In this way the household composition shifted from weekday to weekend and from week to week. Stepfamilies demonstrated different ways of dealing with the oscillation caused by shifting composition. For example, Mitchel Love coordinated when he would spend time
with his biological father in order to maintain his social life. This effectively gave Mitchel control of his visitation schedule so the fluctuation did not interfere with activities and events which Mitchel considered important. Buck’s biological son also visited the household, which altered the dynamics of the family. The days Buck’s biological son visited the Holland family did not necessarily correspond with the days Mitchel was out of town. In contrast, the Jones family felt it was very important to synchronize the visitation schedules so that when Sally’s two boys were gone, Jim’s son was gone too. When Sally’s boys were with her, Jim’s boy was with him. Jim said, we “just took [Sally’s] custody agreement, pretty much did a find / replace and replaced Charlie with [my ex’s] name” (7.02-99). Synchronizing their custody arrangement let Jim and Sally create a consistent stephousehold dynamic, even if the youth alternated between households. Even Brad who did not have contact with his biological father dealt with shifting membership in his stephousehold because Darren’s biological daughters periodically visited. In this study, it seemed that each family developed their own system for coping with shifting household composition.

*Co-parenting.* Another dimension of the alternating households was the co-parental relationship between households. Co-parenting can be defined by mutual decision making and caretaking of a child by both *biological* parents. Ganong and Coleman (2004) explain that “co-parenting does not mean that divorced parents must interact with each other in raising the child, but it does involve some level of communication between parents and some level of interaction with the child by each parent” (p. 45). Using this definition, Ganong and Coleman (2004) report there are four types of co-parental relationships: little to no co-parenting, conflictual co-parenting,
parallel co-parenting, and cooperative co-parenting. Little to no co-parenting happens when nonresident fathers or mothers either have no contact or only minimal contact with their biological children. Conflictual co-parenting describes parents who loath each other and do not cooperate in child rearing activities. The hostility or resentment toward a former spouse takes precedent over positive parenting. Conflictual co-parenting often fades, with time, into parallel co-parenting. “Parallel co-parents avoid contact when they can, are businesslike when they do interact, and tend to have brief discussions limited to information that must be shared” (Ganong & Coleman, 2004, p. 51). Parallel co-parents are not hostile toward one another but not cooperative either. The last type of co-parental relationship according to Ganong and Coleman is cooperative. These parents tend to provide their children with positive, non-competitive relationships in both households.

This study illustrates all of the different types of co-parenting relationships, but also shows that the co-parental relationships were more diverse than what Ganong and Coleman (2004) describe. Only two of the six families cleanly fit into single categories of co-parenting relationships. In the Jacobs family Brad had no contact with his biological father, so they fit the little to no co-parenting type. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the Welivers exhibited a cooperative co-parenting team where biological parents were responsible for making “major” medical and educational decisions. In the other four families, there seemed to be combinations of co-parenting categories. The Holland family seemed to have aspects of a cooperative relationship (they sometimes sat together at Mitchel’s soccer games, Buck empathized with Mitchel’s dad about visitation disappointments) and a parallel relationship (Caroline had very little contact with Mitchel’s father, interactions were infrequent, child-focused, or businesslike). The King
family, too, would sometimes attend sporting events with their kids’ biological father, but when Nick described the relationship he said tersely that it was “cordial” (2.02-119; 123) and that the Nick and Julie “pretty much make the decisions” (2.02-125). It was cooperative in some respects but exhibited characteristics of families grouped into the little or no co-parenting category. The last two families had conflictual/parallel co-parenting. Both the Jones family and the Fisher family had negative relationships with the biological fathers. In the Fisher family the sentiment was a disregard whereas in the Jones family the feeling was animosity. The feelings toward these nonresident fathers were harsh, but interactions were very infrequent. Moreover, Jim and Bill tried to keep the experiences of the two households separate. Across the cases in this study, stepfamilies participated in a range of co-parenting teams.

**Comparing stepfathers with biological fathers.** A third implication of alternating households was that stepfathers were compared against biological fathers. Although social exchange theories (e.g., Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Dainton & Zelly, 2005) might suggest that all sons compare their fathers to alternative father figures, these alternatives are generally imagined or perhaps a composite of a boy’s friends’ fathers. In stepfamilies where the stepson visits his biological father, however, the “alternative” father is concrete. There is an actual father the stepson measures against a stepfather. And, there is evidence from these cases that stepsons actively weighed the differences between fathers and stepfathers in making decisions.

One way the comparison of dads and stepdads had consequences was in determining where youth spent their time. Stepfamilies in this study allowed the youth to determine if they would honor the court-ordered visitation agreement, that is, the youth
made the decision to go or not to go to their biological dad’s house for weekday and weekend visits. Youth did not spend more time than was allowed by the visitation arrangement, but they either honored it or spent less time than arranged. Two of the youth in this study wanted to spend more time in their stephouseholds, one wanted more time with his biological father, one was somewhat conflicted, and one liked the visitation arrangement as it was. Youth desires, however, did not necessarily correspond with the stepfather’s relationship with the biological father. Each case, with the exception of the Jacobs family, is examined below.

Weliver-Brown. One of the youth who wanted to spend more time with his stepfamily was Evan. Karl and Kara tried to maintain a good working relationship with Evan’s dad. There were some decisions which Karl left for Kara to decide with Evan’s dad. Even with these good relationships, however, Evan wanted less contact from his nonresident biological father. It was important for Evan to have a dad around. When I asked if there was anything he’d change about his relationship with his stepdad, he said he wouldn’t change a thing. I asked the same questions about his biological dad, and Evan said, “I think, for my relationship, for my dad, I think he should call me three times every week instead of like every single day” (5.03-76). He went on to explain his reasoning, “Because, he always asks for me at times right when I have dinner” (5.03-76). Evan desired less interaction with his biological father despite the positive co-parental relationship between Karl and Evan’s biological dad.

Holland-Love. The Holland family was in a similar situation. Buck also had a good relationship with Mitchel’s father. Buck described the relationship as “cordial” and “not difficult” (6.02-69). Buck shared that he and Caroline had actively tried to develop a
cooperative relationship “because we don’t want Mitchel to feel that he has to choose sides or something like that” (6.02-69). Part of Buck’s motivation was from his own experiences as a nonresident biological father. Sometimes Buck empathized with Mitchel’s dad, which helped ease tensions between the households:

There were a couple of times wherever Mitchel didn't want to go or there was something going on, and [his Dad] would be a little bit upset about it. And I just… said, “You know, I have the same situation with [my nonresident biological son, Randy]. I understand. And Randy has friends down there too, and so I kind of have had to make the same adjustments with him, sometimes not getting him when I would like to and things like that.” And so I think that helped because [Mitchel’s dad] understands that I have the same situation with a different child, so we just kinda do have a connection in that regard (6.02-82).

Buck empathized with Mitchel’s biological dad’s situation and actively sought friendly terms with him that would allow Mitchel to develop a relationship with him.

Despite the amenable relationship between Buck and his biological father, Mitchel wanted to spend more time in his stephousehold. He explained that the inconvenience of going to his biological father’s house was less attractive than staying at home and doing activities he enjoyed. He confided, “There’s really nothing to do at my dad’s house. There’s no internet. There’s no video games. I sometimes take my Xbox up, but not usually. So we just watch TV and watch movies” (6.03-74). When I asked Mitchel how he saw his relationship with his biological dad changing in the next few years, he believed it would “probably become kind of stretched because I probably won’t go up as often because there’s …nothing to do” (6.03-84). Both Evan and Mitchel wanted
less contact with their biological fathers because going to their nonresident households interrupted their lives in their stephouseholds.

*King-Smith.* Opposite of Evan and Mitchel, one youth wanted more time with his biological father. Even though Christian’s stepfather was more involved in his life (as measured by the CASSS), he considered his biological father’s involvement as more important to him. What was Christian’s step and biological relationship like? When I asked about Nick’s relationship with Christian’s dad, he said tersely “We’re cordial. We don’t talk often or anything like that but yeah, we get along okay” (2.02-119). I probed. “He comes to some of their games and things like that and he seems them on occasion, but that’s about it” (2.02-123). Still curious how decisions were made between households, I asked if they ever made decisions as a group. “No. We pretty much make the decisions here for the most part” (2.02-125). Nick and Christian’s biological dad had an amicable relationship, but Christian expressed that time with his father was more important to him than time with his stepfather.

*Fisher-Shorts.* The Fisher family made overt comparisons between Bill and Steve’s biological father Alan. For example, Bill shared that “I think both Sam and Steve … [know] that when the chips are down, [Bill’s] going to be the one here for them. Not necessarily [their biological] dad” (4.02-93). He then supported his claim with the story described in the section on the Fisher family culture of support about how Steve’s biological father “ditched” (4.01-105) him on a weekend that rest of the family was going out of town. Therefore, Bill stayed behind and took Steve out to a museum to make it a special weekend. Bill’s actions evidenced that he cared for Steve, perhaps more than Steve’s biological father. During my orientation session with the Fishers, Pamela said
Bill did a lot of things with the boys that their “real” father wouldn’t do (4.1). During my visits to this family I often heard Bill compared to Steve’s biological father.

The comparisons between Bill and Alan may have unwittingly caused Steve to feel trapped between two households (see Afifi, 2003). Steve expressed conflicting views. In his questionnaire, Steve reported that he didn’t enjoy talking in person or over the phone with his biological father as much as he did with Bill (4.03-SR), but at the same time in our interview he said if he could change anything in his relationship with his dad it would be to see him more frequently (4.03-59:60). During the orientation session (with Steve present), Bill told me the Fisher house was “home” to the boys; Sam and Steve visited “Dad’s,” but this was “home” (4.1). I also was told that the Fishers allowed Sam and Steve to determine if they would visit their biological father on the weekends or not. Steve, therefore, was actively involved in determining if he would go to his fathers or not. But, even though he expressed an interest in spending more time with his biological dad sometimes he chose not to. Bill shared the following story:

I think it was Christmas like two years ago; we had the boys [Sam and Steve] Christmas Eve and then Christmas day. And then they go up to their dad’s in the afternoon on Christmas. After about three days, Steve wanted to come home, Alan wouldn’t let him. He made him stay until it was time for [Steve] to come back to school. I think they had like three days here before they had to go back to school. … [Because of this] it was I know, over a month before [Steve] would go back up [to Alan’s] on the weekends. To the point of Pamela’s ex-mother-in-law called, and wanted to know why the boys weren’t up. And she said, “Because Alan wouldn’t let them come home when they wanted to.” … We don’t
encourage the boys, well I shouldn’t say that – We don’t encourage or discourage Steve one way or the other. That’s his dad; he is welcome to go anytime his dad will take him. Sam, on the other hand, if he never had to go back, it would be too soon (4.02-93:97).

Sometimes Steve’s decisions led to less time spent at his biological father’s house. Nevertheless, he expressed a desire to spend more time with his father. He seemed to be conflicted.

Jones-Patel. Finally, one youth liked the visitation arrangement the way it was. Jake saw benefits to both “Dads,” and was happy with the custody and visitation arrangement the way it was. His stepdad and biological dad, however, did not get along at all. Jim Jones was the most direct about his disdain for his stepson Jake’s biological father Charlie: “I hate him and I know it’s not a good and it’s not Christian …, but someone else is gonna have to love him because I don’t” (7.02-201). Jim tried to avoid Charlie because he had a few “run-ins in front of the kids” (7.02-199), which were negative. “There’s a lot of tension. I just keep my distance, don’t say anything” (7.02-202). If Jim could change anything about the current custody arrangement, he would have Jake and Jared with him all the time. “It’s hard to share” (7.02-109), Jim explained, “without taking more time from [Charlie and his wife] there’s really nothing we could change” (7.02-110). In this system, Jim disliked Jake’s biological father extremely, but Jake was satisfied with the visitation arrangement as it was.

Summary across stepfamilies. Youth in five of the six stepfamilies visited their nonresident, biological fathers’ households. Therefore, these youth had a concrete image of a father-son relationship against which to compare their stepfather-stepson
relationship. The comparisons made between these relationships affected the amount of time that youth spent with their biological fathers and their stepfathers.

Data from these case studies do not provide any clear pattern of the relationship between youths’ evaluations of their relationship with their nonresident fathers and the stepfather-biological father relationship. In three of the families, the stepfather-biological father relationship was cordial, but in these families two youth wanted more time with their stepfather and one wanted more time with his biological father. In two of the families, the relationship was rather acrimonious. One of these youth was conflicted about the amount of time he spent in each household and one was happy with the way things were.

**Conclusions about nonresident household.** Stepfathering is a complex undertaking which requires attention to the nonresident system. In this study, alternating between stephouseholds and nonresident households implied that stepsons experienced fluctuating household composition, required stepfathers to co-parent in one way or another, and provided stepsons a concrete comparison for their stepfathers in their biological fathers.

**Cross case patterns summary.** Six patterns related to supportive communication persisted across cases. Stepfathers exhibited a primary style for communicating support. That is, their supportive communication tended to default into one primary type of support (emotional, informational, or instrumental) that was consistent with their role as a stepfather. Stepfathers’ motivation, fathering experiences, and social capital all influenced what types of messages they sent and how they sent them. Also, stepsons’ perceptions of messages emerged as a salient pattern in the communication of support. If
stepsons wanted something or saw it as a need, fulfillment of that desire or need was seen as supportive. Finally, the stepsons’ nonresident experiences seemed to color their judgments of stepfathers’ supportive communication. Each of these cross case patterns is incorporated into a conceptual model of supportive stepfather-stepson communication.

**Conceptual Model of Supportive Stepfather-stepson Communication**

Based on this collection of case studies, in this section I present a conceptual model of supportive stepfather-stepson communication. Elements of this model draw on findings presented in this and previous chapters to depict the process of communicating support. Because this model is presented in print, it is difficult to fully capture the complexities of dynamic interaction and developmental processes. Therefore, the scope of the model is limited to a single *interactive episode*, which I define as the smallest number of interactions which transpire between a meaningful or significant stepfather-stepson relationship redefinition. Limiting the model to a single interactive episode is a trade-off. It obscures the developmental and recursive nature of the stepfather-stepson relationship but gives more space for unpacking the processes within an interactive episode. Figure 6.2 shows the full model and Figure 6.3 focuses on the process of communicating support within the stepfather-stepson relational culture of support.

This section is organized into three parts. First, I discuss the concept of interactive episode. Second, I present the model and describe the elements and relationships between elements in the model. Third, I discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the model.
Figure 6.2. Conceptual model of supportive stepfather-stepson communication.
Figure 6.3. Process of supportive stepfather-stepson communication.
**Interactive episode.** An interactive episode is a variable, temporal dimension that encapsulates the model. Everything presented in the model takes place in time, and employing the concept of an interactive episode takes time “outside” the model. It holds time and the developmental, indeterminate nature of relationships constant, freezing the interaction for a moment so it can be represented in a picture.

I define an interactive episode as the smallest number of interactions which transpire between a meaningful or significant stepfather-stepson relationship redefinition. An interactive episode consists of communication between stepfather and son that theoretically could span from a single, pivotal message to a year’s worth of messages. An interactive episode is variable in length. The amount of communication does not define the episode nor does the amount of time elapsed. Instead, the concept is based on the redefinition of the stepfather-stepson relationship.

The concept of interactive episodes assumes that humans do not continuously or systematically evaluate and reevaluate their relationships. While it may be accurate to believe that every message contains “command” and “report” elements (Waltzlawick et al., 1967), the “report” aspect of messages does not always cause a perceptible redefinition of the relationship. It likely goes unnoticed because it aligns with the existing definition of the relationship. As Duck (1995) points out, relationships tend to maintain the status quo. As humans, we tend to habituate our personal relationships, letting them coast down the road until something jarring awakens us to evaluate and reevaluate how we define our relationship (see Burgoon & Hale, 1988). Since evaluation occurs at different points in time for different relationships, the concept of interactive episode is variable in length.
I propose that through an iterative, developmental process interactive episodes are combined to characterize the level of support in a particular stepfather-stepson relationship. That is, patterns of communication within and across interactive episodes shape the culture of support in stepfather-stepson dyads, which, in turn, influences future interactions (cf. Giddens, 1984). Elements of the model will be discussed as they occur within a single interactive episode.

**Elements of figure 6.2.** The conceptual model of supportive stepfather-stepson communication attempts to visually depict the complexity of relating and communicating support inherent in the stepfamilies I observed. The model includes elements of the stepfather (motivation, experience, social capital), the stepson (ΣMSM, perceived need), the stepson’s nonresident household, the stepfather’s biological or stepchildren from a previous relationship, the process of communicating emotional, informational, and instrumental support through micro support messages, relational and family cultures of support, and both integrative and two types of non-integrative strategies for combining relational and family cultures.

The model is depicted in three dimensions. The relational culture of support is shown as a green oval in the x-y plane and encompasses the process of communicating support between stepfathers and stepsons. This part of the model and the relationships between elements is the focus of Figure 6.3 and will be discussed below. In addition to the relational culture of support, one integrative and two non-integrative strategies for combining relational and family cultures are presented. Although the model depicts three types of relationships between relational and family cultures, at a given time a family will likely not exhibit more than one strategy for combining relational and family cultures.
The integrative strategy is shown as a dark green oval engulfing the relational culture of support in the x-y plane. The model depicts the integration of these cultures by embedding the relational culture within the family culture, using different hues of the same color, and through the semi-permeable boundaries around the relational culture. Though somewhat distinct from one another, they two cultures overlap and penetrate each other. The norms of one seem to be shared in the other. In this study, however, not all families integrated the relational and family cultures, so the model depicts two types of non-integrative strategies as well.

The first non-integrative combination of relational and family cultures is shown by an orange oval extending into the y-z plane. This portion of the model represents when the relational culture seems deviant from the family culture. It is represented in the model by a different color from the relational culture, an orange oval, that intersects the relational culture but is perpendicular to it. This was the situation present in the Jacobs family where Brad and Darren seemed to share different roles, attitudes and expectations, and action in their relational culture than in the broader family culture.

The second non-integrative combination of culture is represented by the blue oval on the x-z plane, parallel to the relational culture of support. In this combination, the relational culture of support seemed to operate independently from the family (or other relational) cultures. This was how the Fisher family seemed to combine cultures. Of course, members of a family system interact and are interdependent with one another (von Bertalanffy, 1969); however, the cultures of support seem to operate relatively independent from one another.
The model in figure 6.2 is designed to show the relationships between family and relational cultures of support. Although figure 6.2 includes elements involved in the communication of support within the relational culture, these are depicted more precisely in figure 6.3.

**Elements of figure 6.3.** Figure 6.3 presents the process of supportive stepfather-stepson communication, which takes place within the relational culture of support. The process mirrors a basic communication model and involves psychological processes of two communicators, reciprocal messages, and a channel through which messages sent (Berlo, 1966; Shannon & Weaver, 1963). In this model the stepfather and stepson are the communicators, each with a different set of internal processes. The micro support messages that communicate emotional, informational, or instrumental support are sent and received. The channel is the culture of support, which influences the encoding and decoding of support messages as well as the roles, attitudes and expectations, and actions of the stepfather and stepson. In this section, each aspect of the model is discussed in detail.

**Stepfather.** On the left of the model are stepfather factors, which include social capital, fathering experience, and motivation. They are what a stepfather brings to the table of supportive relationships. These elements of stepfathering are relatively stable, although they are subject to change. Social capital is the knowledge a stepfather brings into the support interaction. During one particular interactive episode, it is doubtful that the level or quality of social capital will change. From one interactive episode to the next, of course, this is not always the case. People learn new information every day; or, put another way, development occurs across the lifespan (Baltes, 1987; Pecchioni, Wright, &
Nussbaum, 2008). Fathering experience includes stepfathers’ lifetime experiences in parenting and caregiving capacities be they with younger siblings, their own biological children, their own stepchildren, etc. This category represents the gestalt of their parenting skill. From this study, the concept corresponds to the pattern described above where stepfathers share themselves. The fathering experience changes from interactive episode to interactive episode, but it is a constant at the outset of any particular interactive episode. Finally, motivation corresponds to the pattern identified across cases and described in this section. Motivation, in particular, may be shaped by a stepfather’s ongoing experiences and stepfathers’ motivation to engage in the communication of support may wax or wane as a function of stepchild feedback, within interactive episodes, and responsiveness to current and past interactions. There is good reason to believe that motivation is also affected by stepchild personality and a host of other factors which are reviewed under the general label of bidirectional effects or child-directed effects (see Bornstein, 2006).

**Message.** In the central part of the model is the message which moves through a particular channel. Micro support messages (MSM), as previously discussed, are the actual words, phrases, gestures, touch, and other behaviors and artifacts which send emotional, informational, and instrumental messages. Importantly, MSM are the mechanism through which support is communicated. MSM consist of any of the three types of support (emotional, informational, instrumental) and include subcategories of these types.

**Relational culture of support.** Micro support messages are sent and received through the stepfather-stepson relational culture of support. The relational culture of
support is represented in the model by a green oval with a dashed boarder. In the model, culture is represented in the background because culture can be a tacit influence in relationships, sometimes taken-for-granted (Gilchrist & Williams, 1999).

The culture serves as the channel for communication, which influences how MSM are encoded and decoded. This customization process translates what might be generally defined as emotional support and tailors it to the particular stepfather-stepson relationship and stepfamily culture. For example, not giving a hug became a joke in the Jacobs family, which could mean that when Brad offered Darren a hug with his arms outstretched and Darren refused it, the particular action of refusing the hug would, counter intuitively, send the message of emotional support because it aligned with the system of understandings in that particular family culture of what counts as emotional support. In other words, because Darren acted in line with the relational pattern established between Darren and Brad, his action could be considered emotional support even though it might seem the opposite in another family. In this way, MSM are encoded and decoded through the channel of the culture of support (see Berlo, 1966).

Another aspect of the relational culture of support that is included in the model are the three elements of culture: roles, attitudes and expectations, and actions. Because culture creation, maintenance, and modification is viewed as a process, the elements of culture are represented as green bi-directional arrows between the stepfather and stepson and between MSM and feedback messages sent. Following structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), these elements both shape and are shaped by the actors and interactions. For example, the role of stepfather may depend heavily on past interactions. As the stepfather...
changes his role, however, it influences the culture; and, reciprocally, as the culture of support changes it can affect the stepfather role.

**Stepson.** On the right side of the model is the stepson who receives MSM and provides feedback in the form of messages (such as using the “dad” label). Three elements germane to the communication of support are included within the stepson. First, the element of perceived need considers how the stepson’s perceptions may influence his evaluation of supportive messages (Reis Clark, & Holmes, 2004). Secondly, supportive communication operates as a sigma (Σ) function of micro support messages. There may be conflicting messages (support and not support) and different types of messages (emotional, informational, and instrumental) during any given interactive episode. And, there may be hundreds of micro support messages communicated. The model recognizes these facts and accounts for them in the Σ MSM function. Third, the model includes the stepson’s evaluation of the relationship.

Within the stepson, Σ MSM interacts with the stepson perception of need such that a message or resources valued as supportive when it is viewed as needed. Stepsons’ perceived need essentially influences the calculus used to aggregate and evaluate the MSMs. The personal calculus likely operates similarly to the “overriding emotion hypothesis” (see Gottman, 1998) where a stepson’s emotional state at the conclusion of the interactive episode colors or helps define the valence of Σ MSM. For example, in the Jacobs family when Brad received his birthday present from Pap, because the occasion was positive and eagerly anticipated Σ MSM was likely positive. Conversely, even after spending about an hour and a half enjoying the day playing games and working puzzles, because after the “dog incident” Brad was dejected, the sum of the micro support
messages likely held a negative valance. There was a larger number of positive, supportive messages but the intensity and impact of the message Darren sent by *not* picking Brad up in the car once the dog was found outweighed the supportive messages. In this way a personal calculus is used to determine the valence and magnitude of the $\Sigma$ MSM function.

A third element within the stepson is relationship evaluation. Utilizing the sigma function in tandem with the interactive episode, the model integrates two levels of support: the level of the relationship and the level of the message. In cooperation, $\Sigma$ MSM and the interactive episode work to amalgamate individual support *messages* into a supportive or not supportive *relationship*. They help explain how relational level bids for affinity are evaluated negatively through calculating the sum of micro support messages. So, for example, even though Bill Fisher engaged in affinity seeking behaviors and Steve rated the relationship as supportive (8 out of 10), he does not use “Dad” terminology because he considers Bill’s micro support messages to be bossy. Understanding how the sum of micro support messages interface with interactive episodes provides a picture of the way supportive stepfather-stepson relationships are formed through communication. The relationship evaluation depends on both perception of need and summation of messages; and, the relationship evaluation influences both of these elements. Stepfather-stepson relationships do not exist in a vacuum, however, and to better understand how stepsons perceive their stepfathers the model incorporates youth’s nonresident household experiences of both the stepson and stepfather.

*Nonresident Experiences.* Beneath the culture of support and interacting with the stepson and the stepfather is an element of nonresidential family system(s). Subsumed in
this element are interactions with youth’s nonresident father (when applicable) as well as interactions with the stepfather’s nonresident children or ex-spouse. The element of the nonresident family systems include youth nonresident visitation schedule, biological father-child relationship, stepfather-biological father relationship, stepsiblings, half-siblings, and so forth – all the factors that make up the youth’s and/or stepfather’s nonresident relationships. It is best to consider the nonresident experiences as separate family systems than an element of the stepfamily system.

Nonresident experiences are represented as dynamic and developmental in nature. For example, a nonresident father may get married, divorced, and then remarried, which is what happened for Mitchel Love. His biological father married or was in cohabiting relationships with three different women. In Mitchel’s case, the dynamic of the nonresident family system changed and at different points included three different stepmothers, a half-sister, and two stepsiblings. Individual development of the nonresident father (e.g., like was experienced with Mitchel’s dad after Buck commiserated with him) may also affect how the biological father treats his nonresident son. Other events, such as the marriage of a stepfather’s ex-wife or taking a job in another town and moving (see Cherlin, 2009) may also influence a stepson’s and stepfather’s interactions with a nonresident household.

Interactions with a stepfather’s nonresident biological children will also impact stepfather-stepson relationships. Buck Holland exemplified this. When his nonresident children visited, he treated them differently than he did his stepson. This created tension in the stephousehold, especially between Buck and Caroline. Visits by nonresident biological children change the household dynamic.
For stepsons, the nonresidential experience is processed in a similar way to the principles of interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Dainton & Zelly, 2005). The relationship evaluation is the “outcome” and the nonresident experience is the “comparison level of alternatives.” The outcome is weighed against the comparison level of alternatives.

Events taking place in the nonresidential household affect the “comparison level” against which a youth measures the support or not support of his stepfather. In this study, the nonresident household became more attractive to one youth, Christian, and less attractive to two youth, Evan and Mitchel. The stephousehold and nonresident household were equally attractive to Jake, and Steve seemed somewhat ambivalent or uncertain about which house he preferred. For one youth in this study, Brad, there was not a nonresident family system. The comparison between households may explain why, in his longitudinal study on stepfamily development, Bray (2005) discovered that about 20% of adolescents change residences.

Incorporating the nonresidential experience into the model is important for understanding support in the context of stepfamilies in particular. Other, biologically related families do not deal with the immediate and concrete comparison with a nonresident father that stepfathers face. There are fewer barriers to changing households for a stepson than there are for a son who lives with both of his biological parents. A stepson who visits his biological father every week would have an easier time temporarily or permanently changing households than a son who spent all his time in one home. This element of the model seeks to account for influences related to youths’
alternating between households and nonresident biological children visiting their stepfather.

**Developmental processes.** Because communication is a process, it is important to recognize that feedback and developmental processes related to each aspect of the model are implied. First, stepfathers and stepsons are developing as is their relationship (Bray, 2005). For example, the process of relational development assumes that stepsons and stepfathers carry their existing relationship definition into subsequent interactive episodes. As stepfathers communicate emotional support, for example, the stepson evaluation of the relationship may change, which will color how the stepson interprets the next interaction. In this way the model can be seen as a continuous and developmental process. A stepson’s relationship evaluation moves from one interactive episode to the next, however broadly dispersed evaluations may occur.

Another process implied by the model is in the message and channel. Like any other culture, relational and family cultures do not form *ex nihilo* but rather form and reform from present cultural materials. In the following excerpt, one of the participants, Buck Holland, described in his terms how their culture of support developed:

Anybody … entering into [a stepfamily] situation should understand up front that it’s not always going to be easy. Just by virtue of the situation that you’re putting people together that haven’t been together in the past, you should expect some adversity. You’re gonna have it. I can’t imagine putting different people in that situation and there not being some conflict. … because of how life was up to that point. There are a different set of experiences and expectations that each group had that are different from the expectations and experiences of the other group.
And when you put them all together, it takes a while to come to a new set of shared expectations and experiences that everybody can live with (6.02-170:172). What Buck described, based on his experiences and projecting into others’ experiences, was the conflict-ridden process of melding two pre-existing family cultures into one. Forming a culture of support involved adapting both sets of “expectations and experiences” into a “shared” set that was acceptable to all involved.

As presented in this study, materials necessary for creating a culture of support were found in the lives of the members prior to joining as a stepfamily. The culture of support is not static, however, but is subject to change. In accordance with Gidden’s structuration theory (1984) the culture bears on actions within a society and also is altered by members’ actions. This model follows the logic of structuration theory to explain how the culture of support is formed and refined through stepfather-stepson communication. As various types of MSM are sent and backchannel feedback related to those messages is given, the thread of relationship patterns begins to weave in and out of the cultural loom. Through continued interactions, patterns become more defined and circumspect. Understandings are informed, modified, and revolutionized. Epiphanies spark. Identities form and refine. Attitudes take shape. Actions engage. The culture of support is nuanced, shaped, and solidified. After numerous interactions the culture of support eventually is shared by all members of the stepfamily system and becomes a “set of shared expectations and experiences that everybody can live with.” The process of communicating messages through a channel serves to define and redefine the stepfather-stepson relational culture of support.
Strengths and Limitations of the Model

This model has both limitations and strengths. Limitations of the model derive from the sample and strengths of the model derive from the type of analysis conducted and the integration of extant theory. First, I think the model should be interpreted keeping in mind the size and characteristics of the sample involved in this study. There were six stepfamilies who participated in this study. In other words, this is not a general model of supportive communication, but is a specific conceptual model of supportive stepfather-stepson communication derived from analysis of six cases.

It should also be noted that the stepfathers, stepsons, and stepfamilies who participated in this study were homogeneous. Stepfathers were Caucasian heterosexual men with varying levels of education who all grew up and lived in the same region of the country. Stepfathers in this study all had experiences fathering at least one child prior to meeting their stepson. Stepsons were 10, 11, or 14 years old. All but one had a biological father who also lived within 50 miles of the stepfamily household and five of the six stepsons had contact with their biological father on at least a bi-weekly basis. Stepfamilies were middle class (earning between $60,000 and $80,000 per year) and included the target youth, his mother, stepfather, and either one or two additional full or half siblings in the household. When considering the implications of the model these limitations of sample size and characteristics should be kept in mind.

The model also contains a number of strengths. First, because this model is based on descriptive within and cross case analyses, it aligns closely with ethnographic data from which it derives. In other words, the model has high ecological validity since it was derived from ethnographic case studies of stepfamily interactions.
Another benefit of the model is that it incorporates existing theoretical explanations of human behavior, such as thinking about human motivation (Heider, 1958), social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), and interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The model builds on decades of theorizing on the process of communication (Berlo, 1966; Shannon & Weaver, 1963) to explain the sending and receiving of support messages. Further, the model integrates culture as a key factor in this process, affecting the encoding and decoding of messages. The model also recognizes that the messages sent during the process of communicating support function as an influence on the culture of support in the family (cf. Giddens, 1984). In other words, culture both influences and is influenced by supportive communication. This model also integrates concepts and processes from interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) to explain how stepchildren evaluate their stepfather relationship vis-à-vis their nonresident father household.

Another strength of the model is that it includes both an actual behavior and perceptions of behavior since both are important aspects of communicating support (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). Micro support messages comprise overt behaviors, which a stepson interprets. As a stepson’s perceptions of their own needs change, what is considered supportive will also change. The model also suggests that stepsons will aggregate micro support messages and evaluate them based on their overriding emotional sentiment.

Finally, the model incorporates the pivotal role of everyday communication in affecting the overall relationship. The model proposes that ΣMSM is the mechanism through which supportive communication accumulates and impacts the definition of the
stepfather-stepson relationship from one interactive episode to the next. I contend that the model, grounded in qualitative work, has great explanatory power.
Chapter 7: Contributions

This dissertation provides information about what is considered a supportive stepfather-stepson relationship and how support is communicated in stepfather-stepson relationships. I describe and examine six stepfather-stepson cultures of support, identify, describe, and examine practices and processes of stepfather-stepson support, and present a model of supportive stepfather-stepson communication. Guided by a relational view of communication, I scrutinize the communication of support in six stepfamily systems.

Findings from this study answer calls for research on stepfamily interaction as well as calls for research on social support in families. This study foregrounds stepfamily communication which has seldom been the focus of investigations (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2004). In addition, this adds to the research literature of “observational studies of support transactions between parents and children…. [which] are needed to improve our understanding of family social support” (Garner & Cutrona, 2004, p. 505). Existing studies on social support in stepfamilies show that developing supportive stepfather-stepchild relationships increases youth performance on a variety of outcomes (King, 2006; White & Gilbreth, 2001), but do not show what constitutes a supportive relationship or how it is maintained through communication. This study delves into the “black box” that is a supportive stepfather-stepchild relationship attempting to elucidate how supportive relationships are developed and maintained through everyday interactions.

In this chapter, I discuss three contributions related to the communication of support in stepfamily systems. I first discuss five issues related to the interpretation of the findings. Then, I remark on how findings in this study inform the relational view of
communication and suggest how this study contributes to understanding of negative outcomes for stepchildren. I conclude by suggesting profitable directions for future research.

**Interpretative Issues**

As with any study, there are ways its design informs the interpretation of its results. In qualitative studies like this one, findings should be interpreted knowing as much as possible about the sample because the sample contextualizes findings and allows for the assessment of transferability. In this study there are important ways stepfathers and stepfamilies who participated in this project differ from nationally representative samples of stepfathers, so I discuss this further below. I then discuss four issues related to interpreting findings in qualitative research. Conducting qualitative research invites criticism from those who understand it best as well as those who distrust it. Therefore, this section addresses common critiques to the confirmability, trustworthiness, dependability, and transferability of qualitative research as they relate to this study of stepfather-stepson support. Understanding each of these aspects of the study helps to contextualize and inform interpretations of findings from this research study.

**Sample of stepfathers.** Recruitment procedures used in this study allowed me to locate families who met the criteria for the study. In additional ways, the study design and the recruitment procedures potentially limited the sample. First, due to the nature of the study and data collection procedures, there are likely a number of stepfathers and stepfamilies who opted not to participate. Some families might have felt they could not commit to a month worth of visits. Others might have been embarrassed to allow a researcher into their home. Still others might have had more insidious reasons for opting
not to participate. For example, the risk of experiencing sexual or physical abuse and homicide is higher for children in stepfamilies than those who live in intact families (Daly & Wilson, 1994; 1996). In order to keep an outsider from potentially observing signs of physical or sexual abuse, some stepfamilies might not have participated in this study. Abusive stepfathers, obviously, can be considered less supportive than non-abusers. It may also be the case that those who were unwilling to be observed in this study were less supportive than those who were open to being observed. This is one of the ways that the study design may have limited the sample of stepfamilies who voluntarily participated in the research.

Second, stepfathers who participated in this study lived in the same geographic region of central Pennsylvania. Moreover, each stepfather had grown up in this region of the country. Consequently, regional norms, beliefs, practices, and values may be evident in stepfathers. For example, Nick King, Darren Jacobs, Bill Fisher, Karl Weliver, and Jim Jones all went deer hunting as boys. Nick, Darren, and Jim continued to hunt as adults. This practice may reflect the regional culture of central Pennsylvania, which is a mountainous, wooded area attractive to many deer hunters. Contextualizing findings within this socio-geographic system may help clarify the behaviors and beliefs exhibited in each stepfamily culture. Other than impact what environmental options were available for stepfathers and stepsons, it is unclear what implications this aspect of the sample had on the communication of support.

Third, the sample of cases was limited due to the recruitment procedures used to identify eligible stepfamilies. Five of the xix stepfathers were identified by community group leaders (i.e., church and Boy Scouts), which implies that stepfathers or their sons
participated in those groups. My research confirmed the fact that stepfathers were all actively involved in their stepsons’ church or Boy Scout troop. The fact that stepfathers in this sample were active participants in civic groups indicates that they deviated from the average stepfather because demographic research has found that stepfathers, on the whole, are less likely to be involved in civic and service organizations than co-resident biological fathers (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001) Thus, stepfathers who participated in this study may be more supportive than stepfathers who did not participate.

Other limiting characteristics of the sample should be kept in mind. First, in all six cases, stepfathers fathered biological children prior to becoming stepfathering the youth in this study. This is not always the case. Some men, like Darren Jacobs in his first marriage, first become stepfathers the day they first become husbands. This fact may have benefited stepsons by giving stepfathers more experience fathering.

Second, four of the six steps ons in the study were born while their mothers were married to other men. Although mother divorce and remarriage is the most common pathway to stepfatherhood, it is not the only pathway (Stewart, 2007).

Third, in this study all but one youth had regular, bi-weekly or weekly contact with a nonresident biological father. Such frequent contact is experienced by a minority of children with nonresidential fathers. Four years after separation 55% of nonresident fathers see their children less than 7 times a year; consistent, frequent contact with a nonresident father is experienced by 38% of children and (Cheadle, Amato, & King, 2010). Contact with a nonresident father has been related to positive youth outcomes (Dunn, Cheng, O’Connor, & Bridges, 2004), although father involvement is likely consequence of child wellbeing rather than cause (Hawkins, Amato, & King, 2007).
Research suggests that when children have fewer externalizing and internalizing problems, nonresident fathers will be more involved (Hawkins et al., 2007). In this study, since all but one of the nonresident fathers were involved, it may indicate that the youth who participated in this study were less problematic than other youth in stepfamilies.

To summarize, several factors make the sample of stepfathers, stepsons, and stepfamilies involved in this study different from the average stepfather, stepson, and stepfamily. Indeed, qualitative ethnographic case studies like this one thrive on detailing the particulars of a case rather than the representing the average. All of these sample considerations should be kept in mind when interpreting findings from this research.

**Objectivity/Confirmability.** Because I am involved and invested in this study, objectivity is impossible. Indeed, I am the instrument of the inquiry (e.g., Cassell, 2005; Pezalla, Pettigrew, Miller-Day, in press). Objectivity in the sense of remaining aloof to the data or its interpretation, is not desired in this study. Instead, my goal has been to remain aware of ways that I influence data collection, be transparent about what I did and how I went about doing it. When reasonable, I also worked to ensure quality data along with trustworthy and dependable results. In order to help maintain transparency and confirmability of my findings, I engaged in “bracketing” or “researcher reflexivity” and “memoing” (Cresswell & Miller, 2000; Emerson et al., 1995) to describe my perspective of how I direct and influence the study. Bracketing involves reflecting on my own identity, thoughts, biases, and perceptions regarding research topics or situations. In my data collection efforts I remained mindful of my role as researcher which caused me to remain silent sometimes in order not to influence stepfather-stepson communication. In
these instances, bracketing happened in a literal sense in my fieldnotes. The following example came from an observation with the Fisher family:

Steve was downstairs setting up the Wii and trying to get the controllers to work. The problem was the batteries were dead. At this point, Bill was upstairs. He had come downstairs very briefly (and had changed into his comfortable sweat pants and t-shirt at this point) and had received a work phone call which took him upstairs. Steve was fiddling with the controller and couldn't get it to work. Steve walked to the foot of the stairs and called out "Bill?" (in a pleading tone, halfway between a whine and a question, I thought). [My first impulse was to say "he's on the phone," because I thought it was rather impolite and disrespectful for Steve to call out to Bill while he was on the phone. Despite my impulse, I said nothing and watched to see what would transpire. I was sitting on the floor in the basement, against the wall opposite the TV just over from the bottom of the stairs.] After Bill hung up the phone, a minute or two later, he called down the stairs "Whatcha need Steve-o?" [His tone was relaxed and I didn't detect the annoyance I likely would have been feeling]. As I said, the problem was dead batteries, so Bill began working to fix the problem, procuring working batteries for the controllers (4.4).

In this example, I noted my feelings and how I potentially influenced the data collection situation with literal brackets. Being aware that my presence in the home was a researcher, not a guest, friend, or even stranger, helped me bracket my emotions, opinions, and other thoughts about the situation in order to accurately inscribe my representation of the situation I witnessed.
Bracketing not only happens while writing fieldnotes, but is also required during data analysis. During data analysis, bracketing involved “venting” in free writes and peer debriefing. For example, in unedited (and undisclosed) free writes, I inscribed my impressions of participants in the study, my reactions to events I witnessed, and so forth. These “researcher memos” helped to expunge my bias from more polished writing efforts.

Another tactic to help ensure confirmability of the study findings is peer debriefing. I recruited help during the writing/analysis phase of the project and submitted early iterations of findings for review and comment from a disengaged, third party who was not familiar with the research project or any of the participants. This reviewer read drafts and shared thoughts about the content of the analysis. In one instance, the reviewer suggested changing my description of an event. The reviewer felt I used biased language and got the impression from the wording that I disliked the individual. My liking or dislike for the participant was irrelevant to the analysis, so I edited my tone. The peer debriefing process alerted me to ways I was unintentionally influencing the analysis and reporting of the data. Thus, using bracketing, researcher memos, and peer debriefing I sought to make my data collection, analysis, and reporting efforts transparent and free from unwanted bias. The confirmability of the research findings is one issue that affects the interpretation of the study. Related are issues of trustworthiness and dependability of findings.

**Validity/Trustworthiness.** Tactics described above also enhance the trustworthiness of findings. For example, peer debriefing establishes a type of ongoing, informal peer-review. Peer debriefing involves sharing ideas, interpretations, and reports
to a colleague who is not involved in data collection. It subjects analysis and interpretations to a check-and-balance system. Not only did I engage in peer debriefing during the analysis/writing phase of the research but also throughout the recruitment and data collection phases. In informal, bi-weekly meetings I met with my dissertation advisor to discuss issues related to the project. We discussed recruitment issues, methodological issues, emerging findings, administrative issues, and so forth. These bi-weekly sessions helped scrutinize ideas, methods, and interpretations in an ongoing fashion.

Trustworthiness was also enhanced in this project using a process called member-checking (Cresswell & Miller, 2000). In this process, participants were asked to comment on interpretations of things I observed or overhead. Member checking took place during informal, observational visits, during individual interviews with mothers, stepfathers, and youth, and to a lesser degree during the writing phase of the study. For example, during an observational session I asked Nick King about an instance of support I observed during a Boy Scout meeting when he directed his stepson Christian to teach the new scout how to tie a square knot. I explained how I saw the incident as a way Nick supported Christian’s involvement. He added, “did you see him roll his eyes at me, too” (2.4)? In this way, member checking helped to nuance and clarify some of my observations. As another example, on the day Brad killed his first deer with Darren (12/4/2010), I heard the story and took detailed fieldnotes (3.4). Later in my interview with Brad (12/14/2010), he mentioned the event in response to a question about when he felt most supported by Darren (3.03). In order to hear the account again from Brad’s perspective and to clarify and nuance my fieldnote entry, I prompted, “Yeah, that was
cool. So tell me the hunting trip story again just so it can be on the tape. I know you told me some of it” (3.03-200). Brad then provided me a detailed account of the still-recent events. Member checking provided a way of verifying my thoughts, impressions, inferences, and interpretations with participants. Being able to gain the “insider’s perspective” on my interpretations of the data enhances the overall credibility of my findings. Both peer debriefing and member checking are powerful tools for substantiating the trustworthiness of my study.

**Reliability/Dependability.** Techniques for enhancing the dependability of my findings include the use of data triangulation (i.e., multiple family members), methods triangulation (i.e., interviews, observations, self-report measures), prolonged engagement in the field with each family, a detailed audit trail (e.g., research log and memoing), and corroborating the data from multiple cases (Maxwell, 2005; Stake, 1995; 2005; Tellis, 1997). An example from the Fisher family helps illustrate how prolonged engagement with a family and multiple methods of data collection worked to enhance the dependability of findings. In my fieldnotes from 11/17/2010 I wrote a note about the nickname Bill used for Steve: “Where does ‘Shark’ come from” (4.3)? I continued to observe Bill’s use of the nickname and through observation of its use came to understand it was a term of endearment, and it was almost exclusively used by Bill. I never heard Pam refer to Steve by the term “Shark,” although she did use “Stevey” from time to time. During my interview with Bill, 12/13/2010, the origin and use of the nickname was clarified (4.02). We were talking about how Bill shows affection to his children, and he mentioned using nicknames. Bill listed the nicknames for all his kids, and when he came to Steve, I prompted, “Yeah, I’ve heard you say that” (4.02-39). He explained, “That’s
more from his mom, but I picked it and I’ll even just – I’ll drop the Stevey and it’s, ‘Hey Shark’” (4.02-40). I again prompted for more detail by expressing “Yeah, I’ve heard you say that. I was curious – ” (4.02-41). Using techniques like multiple methods of data collection and prolonged data collection efforts helped bolster the dependability of data and findings. Since replication of qualitative interpretation is very difficult, incorporating these strategies into the design and administration of this study helped to ensure that appropriate methods were used and adequate measures were taken to obtain reliable data and findings.

**Generalizability/Transferability.** Findings from a single case study are not generalizable, per se, but they can be applied to situations and phenomena outside of a particular case. Keeping in mind the particular sample of cases in this study (rural, Caucasian, middle-class, families from Central Pennsylvania involved in civic groups), three strategies for increasing the transferability of findings are applicable.

The first strategy for increasing transferability is considering ways a particular case is representative of a whole set of similar cases, an exemplar. As Hess and Handel (1959, p. v) point out in the introduction to *Family Worlds*:

> The social scientist loses touch with his subject matter if he confines his work to disembodied responses and acts grouped into categories. Learning in social science must have a sensory base; tables of data must have some connection with people who can be seen or heard in action.

Findings from this study help researchers consider the variability and uniqueness of human participants analyzed in aggregate. Viewing case studies as exemplars is a method often used by journalists who will begin feature writing with a concrete case in order to
illustrate a broad social phenomenon (Weiss, 1994). Considering if and how cases described in this study serve as an exemplar, invites consideration of how interpretations extrapolate from single cases or the collection of cases to a universe of similar cases.

A second form of transferability is employed when case study researchers provide a compellingly detailed account of the operations and subsystems within a particular case. Such an account invites a form of “naturalistic generalization” (Stake, 1995), which lets the explanations of the case either resonate or diverge with readers’ own interpretations of reality. In this study, I have provided detailed descriptions of the sample of research participants and the setting of research activities. Homogeneity of demographic variables (e.g., income, race, gender, age of stepson), have been contrasted with heterogeneity among the stepfamilies. Although similar in demographics, the uniqueness of stepfamilies has been presented. Because this level of detail is provided, readers can infer ways cases correspond or diverge from others in the population of stepfather-stepson pairs.

A third rationale for using case studies to understand social behavior beyond the particular has to do with the ability to understand interactive process which is facilitated by case study research. The benefit of a case study is that it not only identifies the dimensions and components of a stepfamily system (e.g., strategies for building stepfather-stepson rapport, messages perceived as supportive), but it also describes how those components function as interdependent parts. This study has provided a detailed examination of how various components of support work together within six stepfamily systems to identify processes of supportive communication. Therefore, the model presented in this study illustrates the process of communicating support in addition to the
relevant concepts. In other words, variability across cases does not negate the commonality of how variables related to one another within cases.

In multiple case analyses, the goal is to describe the phenomena of interest (Stake, 2005). In this study, the phenomenon is supportive stepfather-stepson communication. Each case in its particularities contributed to an understanding of stepfather-stepson communication in general. This is not to say that these cases exhaustively describe the general, but rather that each case in the particulars adds nuance to the understanding of stepfather-stepson communication in general. Admittedly, concepts will vary from one stepfamily to the next. For example, Brad did not have any contact with his biological father, so he did not have a nonresidential household to use as a comparative alternative. In other words, Brad’s case illustrates that for some stepsons the nonresident household is not a major factor. Other cases illustrated the degree to which a nonresident household was attractive or how the nonresident household developed over time. The strength of the ethnography is that it presents the particulars of a case, which then add nuance to understandings of the general.

As a collection of case studies, findings have great potential; however, strengths of these findings should be understood in the context of multiple case analyses. They should not be taken as generalizable to all stepfathers, all stepfather-stepson relationships, or even all rural, Caucasian, middle-class stepfather-stepson pairs. This study has provided detailed descriptions of individual cases which may illustrate other similar cases and may resonate with readers’ own experiences. The case studies have also described processes occurring within the families which may be usefully applied to other similar families. In sum, findings are heuristic, spurring new thoughts or insights into stepfamily
dynamics. Findings reported here, for example in the model of supportive stepfather-stepson communication, may also be transferable to other similar populations, but that is an empirical question requiring investigation.

**Summary.** The five issues discussed in this section help to contextualize and inform interpretation of findings. Understanding who participated in this research project and the ways participating stepfathers diverged from nationally representative samples of stepfathers is important when considering applications of this model. Furthermore, using tactics like bracketing, member-checking, peer debriefing, data triangulation, methods triangulation, prolonged engagement with each stepfamily, a detailed audit trail, and studying multiple cases helps ensure the confirmability, trustworthiness, dependability, and transferability of the findings from this research.

Understanding what has been done to help ensure quality research will inform interpretations of the findings. For example, because stepfathers in this sample were active in civic organizations, may imply that these stepfathers were more motivated than other stepfathers. This is logical. What does not follow, however, is that motivation is only an important dimension for stepfathers who participate in civic groups. As discussed in the section on transferability of findings, the concepts and processes identified may apply to other cases even if they are variable. This research adds a collection of case studies and a descriptive base of stepfather-stepson supportive communication which augments existing literature on stepfamily systems, the role of a stepfather, and how social support functions in the context of six stepfamilies.
Implications

This study makes a valuable contribution to the literature on stepfamilies by providing detailed accounts of six stepfamily systems. The analysis and findings should be carefully interpreted with a good understanding of what I did, with whom, and how I did it. Yet, the descriptive base provided in these cases helps to augment what is already known about stepfamilies in aggregate and helps shed light on interaction which occurs within these six stepfamily systems. Researchers and practitioners have long recognized that stepfamilies do not operate on a nuclear family model (Pasley et al., 1996). But few studies have elucidated what a stepfamily model might look like. Because of the detailed descriptions provided by using ethnographic data collection and analysis techniques, this study helps provide such an account. In this section, I revisit the relational view of communication used as a theoretical framework in this study and suggest how it may correspond to youth outcomes in stepfamilies.

Relational view of communication. The conceptual framework I used to look at stepfather-stepson supportive communication is a relational view of communication (Duck, 1995: Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996). To review briefly, the relational view of communication asserts that relationships are composed and modified through everyday interactions, relationships are indeterminate, and they vary in the type and amount of interaction. Guided by this framework, in this paper I have sought to better understand what types of supportive messages occur during everyday interactions between stepfathers and stepsons and how those messages impact their relationship with one another. Data I present both aligns with this perspective of relationships as well as suggests an added dimension for supportive stepfather-stepson interactions.
The concept of micro support messages fits closely with the relational view of communication. Micro support messages are the mechanisms which amass relational substance between stepfathers and stepsons. These messages, as they become patterns of interacting, shape the culture of support operative in each of the stepfamilies. They also are summed during interactive episodes to define and redefine the indeterminate stepfather-stepson relationship. The relationship is modified through these everyday encounters. In these ways the concept of micro support messages aligns with the relational view of communication I have presented here.

What differs slightly from the relational view of communication is the concept of the interactive episode I have included in the model of supportive stepfather-stepson communication. Whereas the micro support messages function at the level of the message, the interactive episode allows a plethora of micro support messages to be summed in order to evaluate the stepfather-stepson relationship. In this way, interactive episodes rather than single interactions or even single messages serve to define and redefine the supportiveness of the stepfather-stepson relationship. Rather than suggesting a continuous process of relational evaluation – one which occurs with the communication of each message – I suggest that major evaluations of the stepfather-stepson relationship mark the end of each interactive episode.

Applying the idea of an interactive episode to a model of supportive stepfather-stepson communication adds a new dimension to the relational view of communication. It suggests stepfather-stepson relationship include inflection points during which time the relationship undergoes change. A supportive stepfather-stepson relationship, then, is a complex summation of micro support messages which are evaluated against stepsons’
perceived need at any given moment and then subjected to comparison with a dynamic and developing nonresident household system. When stepsons pause to evaluate and redefine the relationship with their stepfather, the complex contingencies of the nonresident household and the stepson perceived need interact with the accumulation of support messages.

Youth behaviors. In this final section of the paper, I suggest that the increased complexity of the situational and interactional contingencies stepfamily households face helps explain the general trend toward poor youth outcomes. It’s not that youth in stepfamilies necessarily are more problematic or psychologically disturbed than youth in two parent biological families, but the relational and situational complexity of stepfamily living make it more difficult to manage. Relating becomes more strenuous. In stepfamilies there are potentially more opportunities for conflict or disagreement, which have been shown to have more effect on youth outcomes than family structure (Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001; Musick & Meier, 2009). Distinct from other family forms, stepfamilies must cope with the complexity of fluctuating household composition, comparison with a nonresident household, defining the role and concomitant responsibilities of the stepfather, and merging predefined family cultures and interactional patterns. In most cases, nuclear families are not forced to coordinate weekly or bi-weekly visitation schedules with a nonresident father like stepfamilies must. All of these new and different responsibilities and roles add to the interactive complexity in stepfamilies and create a breeding ground for potentially destructive family processes.

Each stepfamily copes with these contingencies differently, some quite adroitly. So too, nuclear families cope with situational and relational contingencies, some very
destructively. This insight reconciles findings in the literature that family process variables, such as level and severity of conflict, are better predictors of youth outcomes than family structure with the consistent finding that youth in stepfamilies perform less well than youth raised by their own married parents. The argument I’m making is that family structure predisposes stepfamilies toward more conflictual or problematic family processes (see also Glenn, Sylvester, & Roberts, 2008). This is not always the case, but it is often the case; often enough that findings across the decades show consistently that youth in stepfamilies are at greater risk for negative emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes than youth raised in biologically related, nuclear families (Amato, 2001).

Because stepfamilies present added challenges and contingencies is perhaps why support matters. The supportive relationship is not necessarily what protects from negative outcomes, but rather it is indicative of the stepfather-stepson pair who handles the contingencies of the situation and relationship in a healthy manner. When there is a supportive relationship, there are micro support messages which encourage, instruct, and facilitate enjoyable activities. The stepson perceives these messages as supportive and is not necessarily left dreaming that he lived in his nonresident household all the time. To be consistently rated as supportive, too, the relationship must be robust to ongoing changes (e.g., adolescents, changes in nonresident system). A supportive relationship is a marker that indicates productive ways of dealing with the relational and situational implications of being in a stepfamily.

It is also important to recognize that the supportive interactions (i.e., micro support messages) are only part of the model of supportive stepfather-stepson communication. The relationship is partly determined by the stepfather’s psychological
processes, partly by the messages the stepfather sends, and partly by how stepsons evaluate those messages within the family and across family systems. It may be possible to teach stepfathers to be mindful of the messages they send to their stepsons, for example. What may not be as teachable are the psychological aspects that go into communicating support. Stepfathers’ past experiences cannot change. Their motivation to stepfather may also be less malleable. Similarly, stepsons’ perceptions of the relationship or how they perceive their nonresident household may not be modifiable through educational programming.

**Future Directions**

There are several potential directions for future research based on this study. First, future research could expand this descriptive base of stepfather-stepson communication of support to include female as well as male stepchildren, widen the age range of stepchildren investigated, and increase diversity of the sample. By gaining information from a more heterogeneous group would allow for a more nuanced understanding of supportive communication. Additionally, descriptive studies would help “test” the model of supportive stepfather-stepson communication developed from this study by detailing other relational and contextual contingencies stepchildren experience from within different regional, ethnic, gender, and economic positions.

One potentially useful method for gaining descriptive information that includes contemporaneous experience as well as retrospective interviewing is the use of a diary-interview method (Elliott, 1997). Diaries are excellently suited to capture human experience inaccessible to direct observation. Ethnographers Zimmerman and Wieder (1977) suggest that diaries combined with follow-up interviews are a reasonable
substitute for participant observation: “The diary partially recovers features of scenes and events which, if witnessed via participant observation, would have been the topic for on-the-spot interrogation” (p. 485). Using a diary interview method requires participants both to present and to reflect on their experiences (Zimmerman & Wieder). Additionally, diary data collection accommodates different participant response styles (Elliott, 1997; Jacelon & Imperio, 2005) and allows participants to express their own priorities regarding the phenomena under investigation (Elliott, 1997). Diaries are an economical way to recruit a diverse sample of stepchildren and descriptively explore the supportive stepfather-stepchild communication.

Building on the descriptive base of stepfather-stepson communication, another direction for future research is to develop and test of a survey instrument designed to explore aspects of stepfather-stepchild support and relationship qualities. The instrument should measure psychological factors affecting the stepfather-stepchild relationship (e.g., stepfather motivation, stepchild views of nonresident household, overriding emotional sentiment) as well as behavioral dimensions of support (e.g., “my stepfather is there when I need him;” “my stepfather gives me gifts”). A potentially useful question for understanding stepfather support, I think, is determining when, where, and how stepchildren feel loved by their stepfathers. McNeely and Barber (2010) used this question in their cross national study and their findings were similar in many respects to the findings on support reported in this study. Similarly, clinician Chapman (2004) presents five “love languages” based on his work counseling married couples which he has also applied to parent-child relationships (see Eckstein & Morrison, 1999). Identifying ways and times stepchildren feel loved by their stepfathers will help add
insight into actions stepfathers can take to develop supportive relationships with their stepchildren.

Both of these future directions add knowledge about the topic of developing supportive relationships and communicating support to stepchildren. Both also potentially expand the current study from the homogeneous sample of stepfather-stepson pairs to a more diverse sample. Such research will contribute greater knowledge about interactional patterns and situational contingencies faced by stepfamilies. As findings are disseminated to vested parties, such as researchers, practitioners, and stepfamilies themselves, they will be better equipped to move purposefully and knowledgably toward optimal outcomes.

**Summary**

The impetus for this study was previous research suggesting that stepchildren, as a group, perform less well psychologically, behaviorally, and academically than children reared by their married parents, and that supportive stepfather-stepchild relationships seem to equivocate these group differences. I sought to understand how support is communicated through day to day interactions in six stepfamily systems. Findings described six stepfather-stepson cultures of support, described and examined practices and processes of supportive communication, and culminated in a conceptual model of supportive stepfather-stepson communication. These findings are contextualized by the sample from which they are derived and several interpretive issues should be kept in mind. Nevertheless, findings suggest that youth in stepfamilies experience increased complexity in relational and situational contingencies which impacts the types of family processes they experience. Supportive stepfather-stepson relationships are symptomatic
of youth and families who have effectively coped with the contingencies of stepfamily living.

This study furthers understanding of social support, the communication of support, and the development of supportive stepfather-stepson relationships in the midst of obstacles, such as no biological relationship, limited shared experiences, and potential comparisons with the biological father. Overcoming these challenges and developing a supportive relationship is a difficult task but calls for ultimate stamina, patience, and love form the men involved. As Martin Luther King, Junior (1977, p. 35) has said, “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” Given the challenges and complexities inherent in stepfamily living, the act of developing and maintaining a supportive stepfather-stepson relationship demonstrates the character of the men involved.
Greetings Prospective Research Partner!

Thank you for participating in the online survey about family structure, family process, and youth outcomes! Your participation helps researchers better understand the ways different types of families communicate and how that communication is related to how 10-14 year old youth feel and behave. During the survey, you indicated interest in a separate, follow-up research project involving home visits twice a week over the course of one month. We wrote this letter to let you know more about our follow-up project’s purpose, what we are asking of you if you participate, and how we plan to compensate you for your participation. This study is being conducted for research purposes by researchers affiliated with Penn State University.

To be part of this study you must be currently living in a stepfamily household that includes a 10-14 year old youth, his/her biological mother, and a stepfather. Others may also live in the household. Parental consent is required for youth to participate in this study.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research study is to learn about your life as a stepfamily, especially how you and your partner relate to your stepchildren and what challenges and successes you experience communicating support on a daily basis. *Your participation in the study will help researchers and counselors better understand communication in stepfamilies and the issues stepfathers and stepchildren face in developing supportive relationships with one another.* We know that living in a stepfamily can be tough for some families and that parenting and stepparenting can be difficult! In fact, current research on stepfamilies suggests that 10-14 year old children in stepfamilies have an increased risk for psychological, behavioral, and academic problems but that developing a supportive stepfather-stepchild relationship can help counteract these risks. So, in order to help stepfamilies raise healthy, happy children, we want to learn about the challenges, opportunities, successes, and failures you and your partner face in communicating support on a day-by-day basis. Of course, your (step)parent-child relationship is not isolated from the rest of the stepfamily; it takes place within a larger family system, so we want to learn about relationships among other stepfamily members as well.

**What We Ask of You:** In order to study how you communicate on a daily basis, our research requires your cooperation. We are asking to come alongside you and learn about your daily routines. We are really asking to partner with you for a month and get to know how your stepfamily works, whether good or bad. There are a number of challenges in relating to 10-14 year olds and we want to learn about these challenges as well as the successes. We recognize that no family is perfect and we don’t expect you to put on a show or entertain our research.
team. Instead, we want to watch, ask questions, and learn how you make things work in your stepfamily, how you relate to one another, and ways you communicate support. So, we ask you to consider showing us the ropes of stepfamily living.

We plan to spend four consecutive weeks with you that include an orientation session, in-home observations, interviews, and a few self-report measures. In total, we expect to spend about 25 to 30 hours with you and your family. All sessions will be scheduled ahead of time and coordinated with your own family plans. No one from our research team will ever show up unannounced.

**Orientation:** For this session, we will come to your home and spend about 30 to 60 minutes getting to know some basic information about your family. We will talk about who is in your family and how they are related, when you became a family, and some important milestones you’ve experienced since you started. In this first meeting, we will also begin scheduling observational visits and interviews.

**Observational Visits:** We plan to visit your home during formal and informal occasions seven additional times. These visits will occur about twice a week throughout the four week study. Visits involve a researcher sitting in on your activities at home and participating with you during other family gatherings, such as birthday parties, family dinner, religious service attendance, or holiday celebrations. These sessions are not designed to be burdensome or like entertaining guests. Instead, they are geared toward understanding your typical family routines and communication. No special preparations or accommodations are needed to participate in these sessions. Parts of some of these sessions may be audio recorded and some photographs may be taken.

**Interviews:** We will also conduct separate interviews with each family member. Interviews will be audio recorded. During the interviews we will ask about your perspective on being part of a stepfamily and about your relationships with other stepfamily members. We also will ask questions about how you encourage and support other members of your family.

**Survey Measures:** All family members will also be asked to complete a few survey measures. These will be online and will take approximately one hour.

**What We Want to Give Back:** First, we want you to know that your partnership in this research is something that will give back to a larger community of stepfamilies as well as researchers. By sharing your life, family, and stories with us for a month you will be contributing to something that is missing in current understandings of stepfamilies and stepfathers. Your partnership also will help other stepfamilies and stepfathers as we take what we learn from you and produce a program to help educate and encourage other stepfamilies.

We also recognize that we are asking for a large commitment and want to compensate you for some of your time and inconvenience. So, you will be given up to $475 for participating. You will be given a $50 gift card after the initial orientation session. You will be given an additional $100 each for the remaining three weeks of observational visits. You will also be given $25 gift cards for each of the two parental interviews. If mother and stepfather both participate, you will be given $50. Youth also will be given a $25 gift card for participating in an interview. Finally, by completing surveys, families will be given an additional $50 for
completing the study. Once the study is completed, you will be given one check from Penn State for up to $350.

We ask that you give this some thought, discuss it as a family, and get back in touch with us. Jonathan will be calling to follow-up with this letter in the coming week. Thanks for considering partnering with us for this important research study. If you would like to contact us, please feel free to call Jonathan at 317.518.0893 or email him at jup183@psu.edu.
### Appendix B: Data Collection Log

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Code</th>
<th>Family Code</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Visit type</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>10/25/2010</td>
<td>02.0 Orientation Session (7-9p)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>10/27/2010</td>
<td>Observation (8-10p)</td>
<td>Family pre-Halloween pumpkin carving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>11/1/2010</td>
<td>Observation (7-9p)</td>
<td>BSA troop 45 meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>11/4/2010</td>
<td>Observation (4-6p)</td>
<td>home w/ 0202 and 0203. TV watching and chatting around kitchen table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>11/7/2010</td>
<td>Observation (10a-12p)</td>
<td>All family members attended church together, first time I’ve seen kids there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>11/9/2010</td>
<td>2.02 Interview (8-10p)</td>
<td>Interview in kitchen/dining table (2 days before 0202 heads to CO for hunting trip)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>11/22/2010</td>
<td>2.01 Interview (12-1p)</td>
<td>Held at 0201’s office during lunch 12-1pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>12/15/2010</td>
<td>2.03 Interview (7:30-9:30p)</td>
<td>at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>12/30/2010</td>
<td>Observation (6:30-9p)</td>
<td>pre New Years, games and conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>1/5/2011</td>
<td>Observation (4-4:30p)</td>
<td>Missed appointment, “open winter,” dog kennels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>1/27/2011</td>
<td>Observation (6-8p)</td>
<td>final w/ cake and ice cream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>11/2/2010</td>
<td>03 Observation (5-8p)</td>
<td>observation, soup w/ family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>11/11/2010</td>
<td>03.0 Orientation Session (10a-12p)</td>
<td>Orientation Session (w/ 0301 &amp; 0302)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>11/18/2010</td>
<td>Observation (3:30-6p)</td>
<td>Watch TV, Chores (3:30-5:50p)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>11/23/2010</td>
<td>3.01 Interview (1-3p)</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>12/2/2010</td>
<td>3.02 Interview (1-3p)</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>12/4/2010</td>
<td>Observation (5-7p)</td>
<td>Christmas pot luck; deer shooting story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>12/9/2010</td>
<td>Observation (6-8p)</td>
<td>deer skinning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>12/14/2010</td>
<td>3.03 Interview (6-7:30p)</td>
<td>Interview in home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>12/17/2010</td>
<td>Observation (7-9p)</td>
<td>pre-Christmas visit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>12/29/2010</td>
<td>Observation (10-1p)</td>
<td>Christmas break &amp; games w/ paternal nonresident daughters visiting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>03</td>
<td>1/7/2011</td>
<td>Observation (6-9p)</td>
<td>Dinner w/ paternal grandparents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>11/9/2010</td>
<td>04.0 Orientation Session (5:30-7:30p)</td>
<td>Orientation Session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>11/15/2010</td>
<td>Observation (5:30-</td>
<td>birthday shopping homework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Event Details</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/17/2010</td>
<td>Observation (5:30-7:30p) post birthday, dinner and homework</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/22/2010</td>
<td>Observation (5:45-8p) pre-holiday break Video games and TV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/8/2010</td>
<td>Observation (5:30-8p) cookies and conversation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/12/2010</td>
<td>Observation (2-5p) Bowling outing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/13/2010</td>
<td>Interviews (3:30-8p)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/20/2010</td>
<td>Observation (3:30-5:30p) Interview in home and Christmas gift wrapping</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/21/2010</td>
<td>Observation (5:30-7:30p) Dinner w/ maternal grandmother</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/20/2010</td>
<td>05_0 Orientation Session (6:30-8:30p) Orientation session</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/30/2010</td>
<td>Observation (9-11a) Christmas gifts and Bayblades</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/5/2010</td>
<td>Observation/ 5.02 Interview (7-9:30a) Morning routine through walking to bus stop and interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/10/2011</td>
<td>Observation (7-9p) Bird house construction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/14/2011</td>
<td>Observation/ 5.03 Interview (7-9p) Interview and painting train cars</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/19/2011</td>
<td>Observation (7-8:30a) Morning routine w/ snow day</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/25/2011</td>
<td>Observation (7-9p) Cub scout meeting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/6/2010</td>
<td>06_0 Orientation Session (7-9p) Orientation session</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/18/2010</td>
<td>Observation (11a-2p) Cookie Fest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/20/2010</td>
<td>6.02 Interview (11a-12:30p) Interview in home</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/21/2010</td>
<td>6.01 Interview (9-10:30a) Interview in home</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/29/2010</td>
<td>6.03 Interview (3-4p) Interview and cannon building</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/4/2020</td>
<td>Observation (6-8p) Dinner and Wii bowling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/16/2011</td>
<td>Observation (7-10a) Church and Sunday school attendance (morning)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/17/2011</td>
<td>Observation (2:30-4:30p) MLK, Jr. holiday from school (2:30-4p)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>1/22/2011</td>
<td>Observation (1-3p)</td>
<td>Lazy Saturday, mother birthday (1-3p)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>1/24/2011</td>
<td>Observation (6-8p)</td>
<td>Tense homework, puzzle working (6-8p)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>1/3/2011</td>
<td>07_0 Orientation Session (6:30-9p)</td>
<td>Dinner and orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>1/8/2011</td>
<td>Observation (10a-12p)</td>
<td>World of Warcraft on lazy Saturday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.01</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>1/11/2011</td>
<td>7.01 Interview (9-10:30a)</td>
<td>Interview in home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>1/13/2011</td>
<td>Observation (4:45-7:30p)</td>
<td>4:45p church youth program w/ choir practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.02</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>1/14/2011</td>
<td>7.02 Interview (9-10a)</td>
<td>Interview at father office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.03</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>1/17/2011</td>
<td>7.03 Interview/Observation (5:30-8p)</td>
<td>Interview and Dinner &amp; Farckle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>1/21/2011</td>
<td>Observation (5:30-8:30p)</td>
<td>Birthday party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>1/25/2011</td>
<td>Observation (7-9p)</td>
<td>Cub scout meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>1/26/2011</td>
<td>Observation (5-8p)</td>
<td>Family movie night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>1/27/2011</td>
<td>Observation (6:45-8a)</td>
<td>Morning routine (6:45a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>2/1/2011</td>
<td>Observation (11a-2p)</td>
<td>Snow Day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: Sample Informed Consent

Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research

The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: STEPFAMILY WORLDS

Principal Investigator: Jonathan Pettigrew
Jup183@psu.edu
234 Sparks Building
University Park, PA 16823
814.380.4712

Advisor: Michelle Miller-Day
Mam32@psu.edu
234 Sparks Building
University Park, PA 16823
814.865.3826

1. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research study is to learn about your life as a stepfamily. We especially want to learn how stepfathers and stepchildren relate to one another. Of course their relationship takes place within a family. So we want to learn about stepfathers’ and stepchildrens’ relationships with other family members as well. Information you provide will help us better understand communication in stepfamilies and the issues stepfathers and stepchildren face in their relationships with one another.

2. Procedures to be followed: You and your family will be asked to participate in about eight face-to-face sessions with our research team. All sessions will be scheduled ahead of time and coordinated with your family plans. No one from our research team will ever show up unannounced. We would also like to interview you privately. Finally, you will also be asked to complete a private online questionnaire.

Face-to-face sessions will begin with an orientation session. We will visit your home and get to know some basic information about you and your family. We will talk about who is in your family and how they are related. We will ask about when you became a family and some important milestones you’ve experienced.

Observational visits will occur about twice a week during the study. One of these sessions will involve spending a couple of hours shadowing your 10-14 year old son. The rest of the sessions will involve a researcher sitting in on your activities at home. These sessions are geared toward understanding your family routines and communication. They are not designed to be burdensome or like entertaining guests. No special preparations or accommodations are needed to participate in these sessions. Parts of some of these sessions may be audio recorded. Some photographs may be taken.
We also want to interview each family member separately. Interviews will be audio recorded. During the interviews we will ask about your perspective on being part of a stepfamily. We will also ask about your relationships with other stepfamily members.

A final part of the research study involves mothers, stepfathers, and 10-14 year old youth completing an online survey. Each family member will complete the survey independently.

3. **Discomforts and Risks:** There are no known risks to you or your child for participating in this research. There is a slight chance that you or your child might feel some embarrassment or discomfort while answering questions or being involved with the research activities. For example, adult interviews include questions about previous romantic relationships or divorce. Youth interviews ask about both biological and stepfathers. If you or your child feel uncomfortable with any question or research activity you do not have to answer that question or participate in that activity.

4. **Benefits:** One benefit from participating in this research is a chance to share your experiences. You also might learn something new about yourself. In addition, you will be helping us better understand what makes relationships work in stepfamilies.

This research may also help us to teach other stepfamilies how to develop strong stepfather-stepchild relationships.

5. **Duration/Time:** Participating in the research will only take 4-5 hours each week during the research. Most of this time, a researcher will be spending time observing your family and you will not be interrupted from your typical routine. The orientation session will likely take 1 hour. The 7 observational visits will last about 2 hours each. The interview will probably take between 60 and 90 minutes. Filling out your online questionnaire will probably take another 30 to 60 minutes. Participating in all research activities over the course of four weeks will likely total about 20 to 25 hours.

6. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential. Only our research team will know your identity or your child’s identity. Pseudonyms will be used for each family member in all reports that come from this research. The information we collect will be stored on a private laptop computer in a password protected file and only research team members will have access to your information. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

Audio recordings and photographs will be used by project staff only for the purposes of this research project. They will not be used for classroom purposes and will not be seen or heard by public audiences. We will store the digital recordings and photographs in a secure, password protected file on the investigator’s laptop. Recordings and photographs will be destroyed at the conclusion of this study (5/30/2015) or will be archived and stored for 15 years.

Penn State’s Office for Research Protections, the Institutional Review Board and the Office for Human Research Protections in the Department of Health and Human Services may review records related to this research study.
Finally, you should understand that we will protect your confidentiality to the fullest extent allowed by law. However, the investigators are not prevented from taking steps to prevent serious harm to yourself or others. This may include reporting to authorities. If we observe evidence of child physical or sexual abuse or if you tell us you are going to hurt yourself or someone else, we will notify Mr. Pettigrew and Dr. Miller-Day. These project staff will discuss the situation with you if possible and may seek help from others to protect you or another person from harm.

7. **Right to Ask Questions:** Please contact either Jonathan Pettigrew at (814) 380-4712 or [jup183@psu.edu](mailto:jup183@psu.edu) or Michelle Miller-Day at (814) 865-3826 or [mam32@psu.edu](mailto:mam32@psu.edu) with questions, complaints or concerns about this research. You can also call this number if you feel this study has harmed you. If you have any questions, concerns, problems about your rights as a research participant or would like to offer input, please contact The Pennsylvania State University’s Office for Research Protections (ORP) at (814) 865-1775. The ORP cannot answer questions about research procedures. Questions about research procedures can be answered by the research team.

8. **Payment for participation:** For contributing your time to the study by allowing project staff to spend time in your home, interview you, and for completing surveys, families will be given up to $475 for participating. You will be given $50 after the initial orientation session in the form of a gift card. You also will be compensated $100 each for the remaining three weeks of observational visits ($300 total). For completing individual interview, youth, mothers, and stepfathers will each be given a $25 gift card. Finally, when all family members (youth, mothers, stepfathers) submit their online surveys, they will be given an additional $50 for completing the study. Amounts not given in the form of gift cards will be given as a check from Penn State totaling up to $350.

Total payments within one calendar year that exceed $600 will require the University to report these payments to the IRS annually. This may require you to claim the compensation that you receive for participation in this study as taxable income.

9. **Voluntary Participation:** You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to take part in this research study. Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Refusal to take part in or withdrawing from this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you would receive otherwise.

If you agree to have **your 10-14 year old son** take part in this study, please check the “I agree” box and sign below. If you do NOT want your child to participate in the study, please check the “I do not permit” box and sign below.

- [ ] I agree to allow my 10-14 year old son to participate in the STEPFAMILY WORLDS study. I understand the study and my questions, if any, have been answered.

- [ ] I do not permit my child to participate in the STEPFAMILY WORLDS study.
If YOU agree to take part in this study, please check the “I agree” box and sign below. If you do NOT want to participate in the study, please check the “I do not agree” box and sign below. You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to participate in this research study.

☐ I agree to participate in the STEPFAMILY WORLDS study. I understand the study and my questions, if any, have been answered.

☐ I do not agree to participate in the STEPFAMILY WORLDS study.

Audio Recordings/Photographs:
☐ “YES” as part of my participation in the STEPFAMILY WORLDS study I give my permission for me and my child to be
  ______ audio recorded (initial if applicable)
  ______ photographed (initial if applicable)

☐ I give my permission for my audio recordings and/or photographs to be archived and kept for 15 years and to be used for future research purposes in the field of family research.

☐ I DO NOT give permission for my audio recordings and/or photographs to be archived and kept 15 years and to be used for future research purposes. I understand that the videotapes will be destroyed no later than 5/30/2016.

☐ “NO” I agree to participate in the STEPFAMILY WORLDS but I DO NOT give my permission for me and my child to be audio recorded or photographed.

You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

_____________________________  _______________________
Participant signature                      Date

_____________________________
Print Name

_____________________________
Print 10-14 year old child’s Name

If you have other children living in your home, there will likely be times during the research when they are observed. These other children are not the focus of the research study.
But, they may be observed and possibly recorded during observational visits in the home. These other children will not be interviewed or asked to complete any surveys. If you agree to allow your **other children** to be observed, please check the “I agree” box and sign below. If you do NOT want your other children to be observed, please check the “I do not permit” box and sign below.

- **I agree** to allow my other child(ren) to be observed during the STEPFAMILY WORLDS study. I understand the study and my questions, if any, have been answered.

- **I do not permit** my other child(ren) to be observed during the STEPFAMILY WORLDS study.

______________________________  ______________________________
Print other child(ren)’s Name(s)  Print other child(ren)’s Name(s)

______________________________  ______________________________
Print other child(ren)’s Name(s)  Print other child(ren)’s Name(s)

______________________________  ______________________________
Participant signature  Date

I verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed.

______________________________
Person Obtaining Consent

______________________________
Date
Appendix D: Data Collection Guides

Orientation Session Guide

Adult Interview Guide

Youth Interview Guide

Adult Questionnaire

Youth Questionnaire
Orientation Session Guide

Thank you for meeting with me. My name is Jonathan with Penn State University in the department of Communication Arts and Sciences. I want to spend a little bit of time going over what we’re asking of you for the next four weeks and answering any questions you may have.

- Distribute and go over informed consent. Answer any questions. Collect signed consents.

Now, I’d like to spend a few minutes trying to understand who is in your family and how you are all related.

- Have you ever been married before?
  - How many times?
  - When did you divorce?
- Tell me about your children and how they are related to each of you.
  - Do you have any children who do not live here?
  - Have any of your children passed away?
- Tell me a little about each of your parents.
  - Are they still living?
  - Where do they live?
  - How often do you see them?

I know we’ve covered some of this information, but I’d like you to help me understand more about the history of your family.

- When did you meet?
- When did you begin living together? (and/or: Tell me about your wedding.)
- What have been some important milestones in the life of your family?

Thank you for your time. Now I’d like to schedule another data/time to come out and begin the visits.

- Tentatively schedule next three observational visits.
Adult Interview Guide

Thanks for taking the time this week to chat with me a little more formally about your ideas and experiences. I will be keeping this conversation between you and me. What you share will be confidential. I will not share your responses on these questions with your spouse or child. This doesn’t mean that you cannot voluntarily share with your spouse/child. It only means that I promise to keep our conversation private. I will be asking similar questions to your spouse/child, but questions will not be identical. So, even though we may have talked about something, it may not have come up in my interview with them.

Family of Origin
Tell me about the family you grew up in.
- How many siblings do you have?
- What were your parents like?
- What did you like about how you were brought up?
- What do you want to do differently with your own (step)children?

What about now. How would you describe your relationship with your parents?
- Where do they live?
- How often do you visit? Talk on the phone?
- How are they involved in your (step)children’s lives?

Current Marriage
Tell me how you met your spouse?
- When/where did you meet?
- How did you get to know one another?
- When did you know you wanted to marry?

How would you describe your relationship with your spouse currently?
- What are your favorite aspects of your relationship?
- What do you wish you could change about your relationship?
- How satisfied are you with your current marital relationship?

Marital History
Now I’d like to know a little about your previous relationships. You don’t have to go into much detail, but I’d like to know about significant others from the past. These could be people you lived with (cohabitated), people you dated seriously for a significant portion of time (more than 1 year), people you expected you’d marry or remain in relationship with, etc. I’d like to know who they are, where they are now, and how much you still see or communicate with them.

Non-Resident Father/Divorce Experience
I’d also like to know a little more information about the (step)child’s father. Tell me about your previous marriage/relationship OR tell me about your child’s biological father.
- What is/was he like?
- What kind of a father is/was he?
- Where is he now?
Tell me a little about your relationship history with your ex-spouse/child’s father?
  - Where did you meet him?
  - When did you marry him?
  - What events led up to your divorce?
  - When did you know you wanted to divorce?
  - Who initiated the divorce?
How would you describe your relationship with him currently?
  - Tell me about his current family situation? Is he (re)married? Living with other children?
  - How often does he see your (step)child?

Legal Process
Tell me about the legal custody process.
  - What was the court decision regarding custody?
  - What about child support?
  - How would you describe the legal process of divorce and custody?
  - What else did you experience going through the legal system?

Stepfamily Experience
Tell me the story of your relationship with your (step)child?
  - How do you characterize the relationship today?
  - What were key milestones in the relationship?
  - What have been some major disappointments?
  - Where do you see the relationship going?
What does it mean to be a supportive stepfather in this family?
  - What are some ways you communicate that you support your stepchild?
  - What people, agencies, or institutions informed your view of what it means to be supportive?
  - When do you know that your stepchild appreciates your involvement in his/her life?
  - Where are you when you feel your stepchild most feels supported?
  - Tell me a story about a time you feel like you really blew it with your stepchild? How did s/he react? How did the child’s mother react? How did the situation resolve?
  - Now tell me about a time you really did a great job as a stepfather? How did s/he react? His/her mother? What resulted from the situation?
Please describe the ideal stepfather.
  - How do you think an ideal stepfather relates to his stepchild?
  - How do you think the mother treats an ideal stepfather?
  - How do stepchildren respond/treat the ideal stepfather?

Family Practices/Socialization
Tell me about the last time you had a family celebration together?
  - Where were you?
• Who was there?
• What was the occasion?
• How did you celebrate?

What do you think are the 3 most important parenting practices?
What are some of the ways you try to teach your (step)children?
  • What lessons do you want them to learn?
  • What kind of people do you want them to be in the future?
  • What are some of the values you try to communicate to your (step)children?

Ending
Is there anything else you’d like to tell me about your stepfamily? What have I not covered that is important?
Youth Interview Guide

Thanks for taking the time this week to chat with me a little more formally about your ideas and experiences. I will be keeping this conversation between you and me. What you share will be confidential. I will not share your responses on these questions with your parents. This doesn’t mean that you cannot voluntarily share with your parents. It only means that I promise to keep our conversation private. I will be asking similar questions to your parents, but questions will not be identical. So, even though we may have talked about something, it may not have come up in my interview with them. This interview is a chance for you to teach me about what it’s like to be part of your stepfamily.

Family of Origin
Tell me about your family.
- What are your parents like?
- What did you like about how they parent you?
- What would you do differently if you were the parent in this family?

What about now. How would you describe your relationship with your parents?
- Where do they live?
- How often do you visit? Talk on the phone?
- How are they involved in your (step)children’s lives?

Non-Resident Father/Divorce Experience
I’d also like to know a little more information about your biological father.
- What is/was he like?
- What kind of a father is/was he?
- Where is he now?
How would you describe your relationship with him currently?
- Tell me about his current family situation? Is he (re)married? Living with other children?
- How often do you see him?
- If you could change anything about your relationship with him, what would you change and why?

Tell me about what happened when your parents divorced?
- What did you experience?

Legal Process
What else did you experience going through the legal system?

Stepfamily Experience
Tell me the story of your relationship with your stepfather?
- How do you characterize the relationship today?
- What were key milestones in the relationship?
- What have been some major disappointments?
- Where do you see the relationship going?
What does it mean for your stepfather to be supportive of you?
- What are some ways he communicates support?
- Tell me about a time you really appreciated his involvement in your life?
- Tell me a story about a time you feel like your stepfather really blew it? What did he do? How did your mom react? What resulted from the situation?
- Now tell me about a time he really did a great job as a stepfather? What did he do? How did your mom react? What resulted from the situation?

Please describe the ideal stepfather.
- How do you think an ideal stepfather relates to his stepchild?
- How do you think the mother treats an ideal stepfather?
- How do stepchildren respond/treat the ideal stepfather?

Family Practices/Socialization
Tell me about the last time you had a family celebration together?
- Where were you?
- Who was there?
- What was the occasion?
- How did you celebrate?

What life-lessons do you think your mother and stepfather want you to learn?
- How do you know what’s important to them?
- How do you know how they want you to behave at home? In public?
- What kind of person do your mother and stepfather want you to be in the future?
- What are some of the values they try to communicate to you?
- What are the 3 most important family rules?

Ending
Is there anything else you’d like to tell me about your stepfamily? What have I not covered that is important?
Adult Questionnaire

Directions: Complete all of these sentences as fast as you can. Write the first idea that comes to your mind!

There are times when I
What people like most about me is
It’s fun to daydream about
People think I am
My father
When things go wrong, mother
On think I can’t stand is
To get along with people, I
My mother
My greatest fear is
If I only hadn’t
I want my children to
The weakest part of me
The fact that I failed
Children
Secretly I
Other people
I often think of myself as
If only my father had
I think my friends
Most women
Fathers sometimes
Being sick
I cannot understand what makes me
I despise
I don’t like the sort of person who
When somebody makes fun of me
A good mother always
I don’t like the sort of kids who
No one can make me
Mothers sometimes
If I had my way
Compared to women, men are
When father comes home
Sometimes I feel like
Compared to men, women are
When told to keep my place, I
When they avoid me,
Around here, too many people
When the family is together
Bosses can
Most men
People under me are
When I’m put under pressure, I
Nothing makes me madder than
When others do better
Brothers and sisters
Our family
If they tell me it’s dangerous, I
Most people don’t know that I
I get down in the dumps when
Children would be better off if their parents
The strongest part of me
Even the best person will
What gets me into trouble is
My ex
My child
My new spouse
Remarriage is
Stepfamilies are
My stepchild sometimes

Leisure and Social Involvement Scale -- Adult

Now, I’m going to name several activities that you may or may not participate in. For each, please rate how often you do this activity using the following and then rate how enjoyable each activity is for you using the following possible responses. For questions asking about things you do with your child, please respond for your 10-14 year old youth who is participating in this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency:</th>
<th>How Enjoyable:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 = Never</td>
<td>1 = Not enjoyable at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 = Every few months</td>
<td>2 = Somewhat not enjoyable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 = Once per month</td>
<td>3 = Somewhat enjoyable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 = Once per week</td>
<td>4 = Very enjoyable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 = 2-3 times per week</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 = Daily</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How Often</th>
<th>THINGS I DO ALONE:</th>
<th>How Enjoyable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq A) Reading for fun (e.g., magazines, books).</td>
<td>(Enjoy A) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq B) Writing for fun (letters, poetry, stories).</td>
<td>(Enjoy B) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Often</td>
<td>THINGS I DO WITH FRIENDS:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Talking with friend(s) in person. (Freq K)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Talking with my friend(s) using telephone. (Freq L)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Talking with my friend(s) using technology (e.g., computer chat room, email). (Freq M)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Being visited by my friend(s). (Freq N)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Visiting my friend(s) at their homes or at other site. (Freq O)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Eating with friends. (Freq P)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Playing sports with my friend(s). (Freq Q)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Playing games with my friend(s), e.g., computer/video games, board games. (Freq R)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Watch movies, plays, concerts. (Freq S)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Playing outside. (Freq T)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>Study together. (Freq U)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>After-school activities. (Freq V)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Often</td>
<td>THINGS I DO WITH FAMILY</td>
<td>How Enjoyable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq W) Talk in person with a child. Talk in person with my spouse. Talk in person with other family members who do not live in my house. Talk on the phone with a child. Talk using technology with a child (e.g., computer chat room, email). Talk using technology with my spouse (e.g., computer chat room, email). Talk using technology with other family members who do not live in my house (e.g., computer chat room, email). Visit family members who do not live in my house. Eat a meal with everyone in my immediate family present. Eat a meal without my child here. Play a game with my child (e.g., board game, video/computer game, cards). Play sports with my child. Play sports with my other family members. Watch movies, plays, or concerts with my child. Watch movies, plays, or concerts with other family members. Participate in an outdoor activity with my child. Participate in an outdoor activity with other family members.</td>
<td>(Enjoy W) 1 2 3 4 (Freq X) (Freq Y) (Freq Z) (Freq AA) (Freq BB) (Freq CC) (Freq DD) (Freq EE) (Freq FF) (Freq GG) (Freq HH) (Freq II) (Freq JJ) (Freq KK) (Freq LL) (Freq MM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq W)</td>
<td>(Freq X)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**THINGS I DO IN THE COMMUNITY OR AT SCHOOL:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How Often</th>
<th>How Enjoyable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq NN) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Freq OO)</td>
<td>Community oriented work or organizations (e.g., volunteer work, rotary club).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Freq PP)</td>
<td>Recreational programs (e.g., bowling league, gaming groups).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Freq NN)</td>
<td>Church related activities (e.g., choir, social groups).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Enjoy NN)</td>
<td>(Freq OO) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Enjoy OO)</td>
<td>(Freq PP) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Supportive Parent-Child Relationships: Adult**

1. How often do you criticize your 10-14 year old child? (1 = never to 5 = almost every day)
2. How often do you praise your 10-14 year old child? (1 = never to 5 = almost every day)
3. How likely is it that your 10-14 year old child would talk with you when s/he is depressed? (1 = definitely would to 5 = definitely would not)
4. How likely will your child talk about a major decision with you? (1 = definitely would to 5 = definitely would not)
5. How much does your child admire you? (0 = not at all to 10 = tremendous amount)
6. What is your overall assessment of your relationship with your child? (0 = really bad to 10 = absolutely perfect)

**Parent Reported Internalizing and Externalizing Scales**

INSTRUCTIONS: I’m going to describe some problems that some children have. For each one I would like you to tell me whether the problem is true of your 10-14 year old child, sometimes true of your 10-14 year old child, or never true of your 10-14 year old child.

1 = true, 2 = sometimes true, 3 = often true

**Externalizing Problems:**
1. Has sudden changes in mood or feeling.
2. Cheats or tells lies.
3. Argues too much.
4. Bullies or is cruel or mean to others.
5. Is disobedient at home.
6. Does not seem to feel sorry after s/he misbehaves.
7. Is stubborn, sullen, or irritable.
8. Has a very strong temper and loses it easily.
9. Is disobedient at school.
10. Has trouble getting along with teachers.
Internalizing Problems:
1. Feels or complains that no one loves him/her.
2. Is rather high strung, tense and nervous.
3. Is too fearful or anxious.
4. Feels worthless or inferior.
5. Is unhappy, sad, or depressed.
6. Is withdrawn, does not get involved with others.

Marital Instability over the Life Course
1. How often do you and your spouse have arguments or disagreements about how you spend your leisure time?
2. How often do you and your spouse have arguments or disagreements about how to raise your children?
3. When you stay home all day with your family, how often do you feel tired or irritated?
4. Sometimes married people think they would enjoy living apart from their spouse. How often do you feel this way?
5. How about your children. How often do you wish you didn’t have to live with them?
6. Compared to most children, would you say any of your children have given you a lot of problems, some problems, only a few problems, or haven’t they given you any problems at all?
7. Compared to the relationship other parents have with their children, do you think your relationship is better than most, about the same as most, or not as good as most?
8. How much satisfaction do you get from your children?
9. Are there any kinds of decision made around your house where you decision is the final word?
10. What about your spouse – are there any kinds of decisions where his/her decision is the final word?
11. Overall, considering all the kinds of decisions you two make, does your spouse more often have the final word or do you?

Stepfamily Life Index

7-point Agree-Disagree Scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)

1. I get sick and tired of all the fighting that occurs in my stepfamily.
2. I have a peaceful stepfamily.
3. Overall, we really get along as a stepfamily.
4. When problems arise in my stepfamily, we have a hard time finding a compromise.
5. In my stepfamily, we are able to negotiate our differences.
6. Members of my stepfamily do not respect each other’s right to privacy.
7. Members of my stepfamily feel loyal to each other.
8. I feel a sense of “family” in my stepfamily.
9. In my stepfamily, members try to be thoughtful of each other.
10. There is a lot of conflict among members in my stepfamily.
11. Members of my stepfamily respect each other.
12. I do not enjoy spending time with my stepfamily.
13. There is a lot of tension in my stepfamily.
14. Spending time with my stepfamily is really stressful for me.
15. Members of my stepfamily do not enjoy spending “quality time” together.
16. Members of my stepfamily couldn’t care less about family traditions.
17. I am committed to members of my stepfamily.
18. We expect all of our family members to attend stepfamily celebrations.
19. In my stepfamily, members tend to go along with what the family decides to do.
20. When we have a family celebration, everyone in my stepfamily participates.
21. We honor everyone’s birthday in my stepfamily.
22. In my stepfamily, we avoid talking about our relationships with each other.
23. We do not have a sense of “togetherness” in my stepfamily.
24. In my stepfamily, it is easier to discuss my problems with people outside my family than with other family members.
25. As a stepfamily, we do not value openness among members.
26. In my stepfamily, members tend to avoid discussing controversial issues concerning the family.
27. In my stepfamily, members keep to themselves.
28. I feel closer to people outside my stepfamily than to other family members.
29. I would rather talk about my problems with members of my stepfamily than with people outside my family.
30. My stepfamily tries new ways of dealing with family problems.
31. In my stepfamily, family meetings are important for discussing problems we have with each other.
32. In my stepfamily, the parents tend to negotiate the rules with the children.
33. In my stepfamily, members tend to speak what is on their minds.
34. Members in my stepfamily say what they want to say.
35. Members of my stepfamily are really flexible in how they handle day-to-day activities.
36. As a stepfamily, we adapt quite well to sudden changes in our schedules.
37. Members of my stepfamily are really set in their ways.
38. Members of my stepfamily are really stubborn.

**Family Communication Environments Instrument**

*Conversational Orientation (Expressiveness)*

1. I often ask my child’s opinion when the family is talking about something.
2. I encourage my child to challenge my ideas and beliefs.
3. My child usually tells me what s/he is thinking about things.
4. My child can tell me almost anything.
5. I encourage my child to express his/her feelings.
6. In our family, we often talk about our feelings and emotions.
7. In our family, we often talk about our plans and hopes for the future.
8. I reassure and comfort my child when s/he is feeling low.
9. We tell each other how much we love or care about each other.
10. I like to hear my child’s opinions, even when I don’t agree with him/her.

**Conformity Orientation (Structural Traditionalism)**

1. When anything really important is involved, I expect my child to obey without question.
2. In our home, I usually have the last word.
3. I feel that it is important to be the boss.
4. When my child is at home, s/he is expected to obey my rules.
5. I often say things like “You’ll know better when you grow up.”
6. I often say things like “My ideas are right and you should not question them.”
7. I often say things like “A child should not argue with adults.”
8. I sometimes become irritated when my child’s views if they are different from mine.
9. A woman should take her husband’s last name when she marries.

**Avoidance**

1. I often say things like “There are some things that just shouldn’t be talked about.”
2. I often say things like “You should give in on arguments rather than risk making people mad.”
3. Some issues will disappear if two people can just avoid arguing about them.
4. It is better to hide one’s true feelings in order to avoid hurting a family member.
5. In a family, it is better to avoid conflicts than to engage in them.
6. If I don’t approve something my child does, I’d rather not know about it.
Youth Questionnaire

Sentence Completion Exercise: Youth
Directions: Complete all of these sentences as fast as you can. Write the first idea that comes to your mind!

My mother and I
When the family is together
My father and I
When things go wrong, mother
I am most scared of
When I do something wrong, father
When other kids don’t play with me
People think I am
My father
My mother
I am sorry when I
I want my children to
What gets me into trouble is
Children
If my father would only
Mothers sometimes
Secretly I
Fathers sometimes
I hate
I don’t like the sort of kids who
If I had my way
The thing that really makes me mad is
What people like most about me is
Brothers and sisters
Our family
If the tell me I shouldn’t, I
One thing I can’t stand is
To make people like me
Other kids
Teachers are
I think my friends
Most girls
Being sick
I don’t like the sort of person who
When somebody makes fun of me
No one can make me
Sometimes I feel like
Most boys
When I take care of younger kids
When younger kids hang around
It’s fun to daydream about
I feel sad when
Children would be better off if their parents
My stepmom and I
My stepdad and I
Stepbrothers and stepsisters
Stepdad’s sometimes
Stepmom’s sometimes
Our stepfamily
When my biological parents are together
When I visit my [non-resident parent]
When I’m alone

Leisure and Social Involvement Scale -- Youth

Now, I’m going to name several activities that you may or may not participate in. For each, please rate how often you do this activity using the following and then rate how enjoyable each activity is for you using the following possible responses. I am going to do the first two with you so you can get the hang of it, then you can do the rest yourself or I can keep on helping.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency:</th>
<th>How Often</th>
<th>THINGS I DO ALONE:</th>
<th>How Enjoyable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 = Never</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq A) Reading for fun (e.g., magazines, books).</td>
<td>(Enjoy A) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 = Every few months</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq B) Writing for fun (letters, poetry, stories).</td>
<td>(Enjoy B) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 = Once per month</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq C) Studying.</td>
<td>(Enjoy C) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 = Once per week</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq D) Watch TV.</td>
<td>(Enjoy D) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 = 2-3 times per week</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq E) Listen to music.</td>
<td>(Enjoy E) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 = Daily</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq F) Playing video or computer games.</td>
<td>(Enjoy F) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Expressive activities
(singing, play music, paint, draw, etc.)
(G)

Gardening.
(H)

Hobby.
(I)

Exercise/work out.
(J)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How Often</th>
<th>THINGS I DO WITH FRIENDS:</th>
<th>How Enjoyable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq G) Talking with friend(s) in person.</td>
<td>(Enjoy G) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq H) Talking with my friend(s) using telephone.</td>
<td>(Enjoy H) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq I) Talking with my friend(s) using technology (e.g., computer chat room, email).</td>
<td>(Enjoy I) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq J) Being visited by my friend(s).</td>
<td>(Enjoy J) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq K) Visiting my friend(s) at their homes or at other site.</td>
<td>(Enjoy K) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq L) Eating with friends.</td>
<td>(Enjoy L) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq M) Playing sports with my friend(s).</td>
<td>(Enjoy M) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq N) Playing games with my friend(s), e.g., computer/video games, board games.</td>
<td>(Enjoy N) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq O) Watch movies, plays, concerts.</td>
<td>(Enjoy O) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq P) Playing outside.</td>
<td>(Enjoy P) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq Q) Study together.</td>
<td>(Enjoy Q) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq R) After-school activities.</td>
<td>(Enjoy R) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9851371734

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How Often</th>
<th>THINGS I DO WITH FAMILY</th>
<th>How Enjoyable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq W) Talk in person with a parent.</td>
<td>(Enjoy W) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq X) Talk in person with my siblings.</td>
<td>(Enjoy X) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq Y) Talk in person with other family members who do not live in my house.</td>
<td>(Enjoy Y) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Often</td>
<td>THINGS I DO IN THE COMMUNITY OR AT SCHOOL:</td>
<td>How Enjoyable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq NN) Church related activities (e.g., choir, youth group activities).</td>
<td>(Enjoy NN) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>(Freq OO) Community oriented work or organizations (e.g., volunteer work, scouts).</td>
<td>(Enjoy OO) 1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Supportive Parent-Child Relationships: Youth

Stepfather
How often does your stepfather criticize you? (1 = never to 5 = almost every day)
How often does your stepfather praise you? (1 = never to 5 = almost every day)
How likely is it that you would talk with your stepfather when you’re depressed? (1 = definitely would to 5 = definitely would not)
How likely will you talk with your stepfather about a major decision? (1 = definitely would to 5 = definitely would not)
How much do you admire your stepfather? (0 = not at all to 10 = tremendous amount)
What is your overall assessment of your relationship with your stepfather? (0 = really bad to 10 = absolutely perfect)

How about with your mother?
1. How often does your mother criticize you? (1 = never to 5 = almost every day)
2. How often does your mother praise you? (1 = never to 5 = almost every day)
3. How likely is it that you would talk with your mother when you’re depressed? (1 = definitely would to 5 = definitely would not)
4. How likely will you talk with your mother about a major decision? (1 = definitely would to 5 = definitely would not)
5. How much do you admire your mother? (0 = not at all to 10 = tremendous amount)
6. What is your overall assessment of your relationship with your mother? (0 = really bad to 10 = absolutely perfect)

Youth Reported Internalizing and Externalizing Scales

Below is a list of behaviors that describe some kids. How true is each of these for you now or during the past 6 months?

0 = Not True; 1 = Somewhat or Sometimes True; 2 = Very True or Often True

I feel lonely
I cry a lot
I deliberately try to hurt or kill myself
I try to get a lot of attention
I am jealous of others
I am afraid I might think or do something bad
I feel that I have to be perfect
I feel that no one loves me
I feel that others are out to get me
I feel worthless or inferior
I am nervous or tense
I am too fearful or anxious
I feel too guilty
I am self-conscious or easily embarrassed
My moods or feelings change suddenly
I think about killing myself
I am unhappy, sad, or depressed
I worry a lot

The following is a list of behaviors related to laws and rules. We'd like to know whether you've done any of these things **during the past 12 months**. This is personal and confidential. No one will know how you answered these questions. Please be honest in answering them.

1 = Never, 2 = once, 3 = sometimes (2-10 times), 4 = more than 10 times

- Put down someone to their face.
- Spread a false rumor about someone.
- Picked on someone.
- Excluded another student from your group.
- Insulted someone’s family.
- Started a fight between other people.
- Taken something worth less than $25 that didn't belong to you.
- Taken something worth $25 or more that didn't belong to you.
- Taken a car or other vehicle without the owner's permission, just to drive around.
- Beat up someone or physically fought with someone because they made you angry (other than just playing around).
- Shoplifted something from a store.
- Snatched someone's purse or wallet without hurting him/her.
- Purposely damaged or destroyed property that did not belong to you.
- Broken into or tried to break into a building just for fun or to look around.
- Broken into or tried to break into a building to steal or damage something.
- Used drugs to enhance athletic performance.
- Thrown objects such as rocks or bottles at people to hurt or scare them.
- Threatened someone with a weapon (knife, gun, club, etc.).
- Attacked someone with a weapon, trying to seriously hurt him/her.
- Used a weapon or force to get money or things from someone.
- Set fire to a building or field or something like that just for fun.
- Been picked up by the police for breaking a law.
- Been suspended from school for disciplinary reasons.
- Cheated on a test.
- Skipped school without an excuse.
- Skipped a class without an excuse.
Lied to parent(s).
Lied to teachers.
Taken a gun to school.
Taken a knife to school.
Gotten in trouble for disrupting class.
Gotten in trouble for talking back to a teacher.
Painted or written something on a building or other structure.
“Made out.”
Had sex.
Run away from home.

7-point Agree-Disagree Scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)

39. I get sick and tired of all the fighting that occurs in my stepfamily.
40. I have a peaceful stepfamily.
41. Overall, we really get along as a stepfamily.
42. When problems arise in my stepfamily, we have a hard time finding a compromise.
43. In my stepfamily, we are able to negotiate our differences.
44. Members of my stepfamily do not respect each other’s right to privacy.
45. Members of my stepfamily feel loyal to each other.
46. I feel a sense of “family” in my stepfamily.
47. In my stepfamily, members try to be thoughtful of each other.
48. There is a lot of conflict among members in my stepfamily.
49. Members of my stepfamily respect each other.
50. I do not enjoy spending time with my stepfamily.
51. There is a lot of tension in my stepfamily.
52. Spending time with my stepfamily is really stressful for me.
53. Members of my stepfamily do not enjoy spending “quality time” together.
54. Members of my stepfamily couldn’t care less about family traditions.
55. I am committed to members of my stepfamily.
56. We expect all of our family members to attend stepfamily celebrations.
57. In my stepfamily, members tend to go along with what the family decides to do.
58. When we have a family celebration, everyone in my stepfamily participates.
59. We honor everyone’s birthday in my stepfamily.
60. In my stepfamily, we avoid talking about our relationships with each other.
61. We do not have a sense of “togetherness” in my stepfamily.
62. In my stepfamily, it is easier to discuss my problems with people outside my family than with other family members.
63. As a stepfamily, we do not value openness among members.
64. In my stepfamily, members tend to avoid discussing controversial issues concerning the family.
65. In my stepfamily, members keep to themselves.
66. I feel closer to people outside my stepfamily than to other family members.
67. I would rather talk about my problems with members of my stepfamily than with people outside my family.
68. My stepfamily tries new ways of dealing with family problems.
69. In my stepfamily, family meetings are important for discussing problems we have with each other.
70. In my stepfamily, the parents tend to negotiate the rules with the children.
71. In my stepfamily, members tend to speak what is on their minds.
72. Members in my stepfamily say what they want to say.
73. Members of my stepfamily are really flexible in how they handle day-to-day activities.
74. As a stepfamily, we adapt quite well to sudden changes in our schedules.
75. Members of my stepfamily are really set in their ways.
76. Members of my stepfamily are really stubborn.

The following questions ask your opinions about your stepfather. Please answer if you agree or disagree with the following statements about your stepfather.

**Family Communication Environments Instrument -- Stepfather**

*Conversational Orientation (Expressiveness)*
- My stepfather often asks my opinion when the family is talking about something.
- My stepfather encourages me to challenge his ideas and beliefs.
- I usually tell my stepfather what I’m thinking about things.
- I can tell my stepfather almost anything.
- My stepfather encourages me to express my feelings.
- In our family, we often talk about our feelings and emotions.
- In our family, we often talk about our plans and hopes for the future.
- My stepfather reassures and comforts me when I’m feeling low.
- We tell each other how much we love or care about each other.
- My stepfather likes to hear my opinions, even when he doesn’t agree with me.

*Conformity Orientation (Structural Traditionalism)*
- When anything really important is involved, my stepfather expects me to obey without question.
- In our home, my stepfather usually has the last word.
- My stepfather feels that it is important to be the boss.
- When I’m at home, I’m expected to obey my stepfather’s rules.
- My stepfather often says things like “You’ll know better when you grow up.”
- My stepfather often says things like “My ideas are right and you should not question them.”
- My stepfather often says things like “A child should not argue with adults.”
- My stepfather sometimes becomes irritated with my views if they are different from his.
- A woman should take her husband’s last name when she marries.

*Avoidance*
- My stepfather often says things like “There are some things that just shouldn’t be talked about.”
My stepfather often says things like “You should give in on arguments rather than risk making people mad.”
Some issues will disappear if two people can just avoid arguing about them.
It is better to hide one’s true feelings in order to avoid hurting a family member.
In a family, it is better to avoid conflicts than to engage in them.
If my stepfather doesn’t approve of it, he’d rather not know about it.
Now I’m going to ask about your mother. The questions are the same, but this time, think about whether you agree or disagree with the following statements about your mother.

**Family Communication Environments Instrument -- Mother**

*Conversational Orientation (Expressiveness)*
- My mother often asks my opinion when the family is talking about something.
- My mother encourages me to challenge her ideas and beliefs.
- I usually tell my mother what I’m thinking about things.
- I can tell my mother almost anything.
- My mother encourages me to express my feelings.
- In our family, we often talk about our feelings and emotions.
- In our family, we often talk about our plans and hopes for the future.
- My mother reassures and comforts me when I’m feeling low.
- We tell each other how much we love or care about each other.
- My mother likes to hear my opinions, even when she doesn’t agree with me.

*Conformity Orientation (Structural Traditionalism)*
- When anything really important is involved, my mother expects me to obey without question.
- In our home, my mother usually has the last word.
- My mother feels that it is important to be the boss.
- When I’m at home, I’m expected to obey my mother’s rules.
- My mother often says things like “You’ll know better when you grow up.”
- My mother often says things like “My ideas are right and you should not question them.”
- My mother often says things like “A child should not argue with adults.”
- My mother sometimes becomes irritated with my views if they are different from hers.
- A woman should take her husband’s last name when she marries.

*Avoidance*
- My mother often says things like “There are some things that just shouldn’t be talked about.”
- My mother often says things like “You should give in on arguments rather than risk making people mad.”
- Some issues will disappear if two people can just avoid arguing about them.
- It is better to hide one’s true feelings in order to avoid hurting a family member.
- In a family, it is better to avoid conflicts than to engage in them.
- If my mother doesn’t approve of it, she’d rather not know about it.

**Family Communication Environments Instrument -- Father**

*Conversational Orientation (Expressiveness)*
- My father often asks my opinion when the family is talking about something.
- My father encourages me to challenge his ideas and beliefs.
- I usually tell my father what I’m thinking about things.
- I can tell my father almost anything.
My father encourages me to express my feelings.
In our family, we often talk about our feelings and emotions.
In our family, we often talk about our plans and hopes for the future.
My father reassures and comforts me when I’m feeling low.
We tell each other how much we love or care about each other.
My father likes to hear my opinions, even when he doesn’t agree with me.

Conformity Orientation (Structural Traditionalism)
When anything really important is involved, my father expects me to obey without question.
In our home, my father usually has the last word.
My father feels that it is important to be the boss.
When I’m at home, I’m expected to obey my father’s rules.
My father often says things like “You’ll know better when you grow up.”
My father often says things like “My ideas are right and you should not question them.”
My father often says things like “A child should not argue with adults.”
My father sometimes becomes irritated with my views if they are different from his.
A woman should take her husband’s last name when she marries.

Avoidance
My father often says things like “There are some things that just shouldn’t be talked about.”
My father often says things like “You should give in on arguments rather than risk making people mad.”
Some issues will disappear if two people can just avoid arguing about them.
It is better to hide one’s true feelings in order to avoid hurting a family member.
In a family, it is better to avoid conflicts than to engage in them.
If my father doesn’t approve of it, he’d rather not know about it.

Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS)

Please respond to each of the following items indicating how often they happen and how important each is to you.

(How often): (1) Yes, (2) kind of, (3) No, (4) Not applicable
(How important): (1) Not Important, (2) Somewhat Important, (3) Very Important

My stepfather …

listens to me when I was mad
expresses pride in me
helps me practice something
makes suggestions when I was uncertain
helps me make a decision
gives me good advice
helps me find an answer
praises me when I tried hard or did a good job
rewards me when I did something well
 tells me how well I do on tasks
 understands my feelings
 makes me feel better when I messed up
 spends time with me
 gives me advice
 explains something when I was confused
 calms me down when I was nervous about something
 is fair to me
 treats me with respect
 makes suggestions when I needed help
 asks me for suggestions

My father …
 listens to me when I was mad
 expresses pride in me
 helps me practice something
 makes suggestions when I was uncertain
 helps me make a decision
 gives me good advice
 helps me find an answer
 praises me when I tried hard or did a good job
 rewards me when I did something well
 tells me how well I do on tasks
 understands my feelings
 makes me feel better when I messed up
 spends time with me
 gives me advice
 explains something when I was confused
 calms me down when I was nervous about something
 is fair to me
 treats me with respect
 makes suggestions when I needed help
 asks me for suggestions

My mother …
 listens to me when I was mad
 expresses pride in me
 helps me practice something
 makes suggestions when I was uncertain
 helps me make a decision
 gives me good advice
 helps me find an answer
 praises me when I tried hard or did a good job
 rewards me when I did something well
 tells me how well I do on tasks
understands my feelings
makes me feel better when I messed up
spends time with me
gives me advice
explains something when I was confused
calms me down when I was nervous about something
is fair to me
treats me with respect
makes suggestions when I needed help
asks me for suggestions
References


Cheatle, J. E., Amato, P. R., & King, V. (2010). Patterns of nonresident father contact Demography, 47, 205–225.


307


Curriculum Vita

Jonathan Pettigrew holds a bachelor’s of science degree in psychology from Angelo State University, where he graduated with honors, a master’s of arts degree in communication studies from Indiana University, and a doctorate of philosophy in the department of Communication Arts and Sciences from Penn State University.

Pettigrew earned academic and leadership scholarships as an undergraduate and was honored with a university fellowship to complete his master’s degree. He received the IUPUI Communication Studies Outstanding Research Award as a master’s student as well as the Carroll C. Arnold Award for Scholarly Excellence as a doctoral student. Pettigrew was competitively selected to attend the prestigious doctoral honors seminar sponsored by the National Communication Association as well as the interdisciplinary Schreyer Marriage and Social Science Seminar sponsored by the Witherspoon Institute and hosted by Princeton University.

Pettigrew views relationships, particularly family relations, are central to human experience. His master's thesis involved qualitative interviews and was published in the *Marriage & Family Review* (Pettigrew, 2009). Portions of this research project were also presented at the International Association for Relationship Research and the National Communication Association. His dissertation research started with a project funded by the department of Communication Arts and Sciences in which he conducted an online survey of primary caregivers of 10-14 year old youth. A paper based on this research entitled “Family Process and Youth Outcomes” was presented at the National Communication Association. His dissertation was supported by a grant from Penn State’s Children, Youth, and Families Consortium, a Dissertation Support Award, and a semester’s release time granted by the department of Communication Arts and Sciences. His dissertation investigated the communication of support between stepfathers and stepsons in six stepfamily systems using ethnographic, qualitative field research methods.

Pettigrew seeks to apply scholarship to pressing social problems. During his studies Pettigrew worked on the Drug Resistance Strategies (DRS) project, an NIDA funded, multi-site, interdisciplinary, collaborative randomized controlled trial adapting the 7th grade, keepin’ it REAL prevention curriculum for rural schools in Pennsylvania and Ohio, studying the implementation of the curriculum, and developing a parent-focused communication competence curriculum. Collaboration on this project resulted in articles published in the *Journal of Applied Communication Research* (Pettigrew, Miller-Day, Krieger & Hecht, 2011), *Journal of Adolescent Research* (Pettigrew, Miller-Day, Krieger & Hecht, in press), *Qualitative Research* (Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Miller-Day, in press), and a number of presentations at the Society of Prevention Research, the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, and the National Communication Association.