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STRUGGLING, COPING, AND THRIVING: SENSE-MAKING IN  
STEPFAMILY COUPLES' NARRATIVES ABOUT COPARENTING

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A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of Social Sciences

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Andrea L. Smith Sisk

June, 2009

Advisor: Dr. Fran C. Dickson

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## ABSTRACT

The term coparenting implies a bioparental dyad that often excludes the stepparent's role in sharing parenting across joint-custody households. Focusing solely on this dyad also precludes gaining an understanding of how stepfamily couples manage together the communication and sharing of parental responsibilities with the parent(s) in the shared children's other home. In a departure from this bioparental dyad-focused approach, this study locates the stepfamily couple at the center of an inquiry into managing coparenting across households. This mixed methods design study included in-depth interviews of 32 stepfamily couples whose narratives about coparenting were analyzed using grounded theory methods. Forty-one percent of stepparents engage in direct coparenting communication, sometimes manifested as the coactive approach identified in this study. Stepfamily couples also involve the stepparent indirectly in coparenting communication, through the conferred and consultative approaches. As well, the couples' narratives about coparenting identify them as either united, where they share the experience, or divided, where coparenting is reserved exclusively for the bioparent to manage. The stepfamily couples' narratives about significant coparenting experiences revealed that they experience and make sense of coparenting as 1) struggling, 2) coping, or 3) thriving. No significant relationship was found between marital satisfaction and experiencing coparenting as strugglers, copers or thrivers. Grounded theory analysis of these narratives also reflects the four dichotomous dimensions of 1) regard-disregard, 2)

decency-duplicity, 3) facilitation-interference, and 4) accommodation-inflexibility. Significant incidents located along these dimensions contribute to the stepfamily couples' identification as struggling, coping, or thriving in coparenting. Experiences on the extreme ends of the dichotomous dimensions generate positive and negative turning points for the coparenting interactions and relationships. As well, experiences on the negative end of the dimensional poles can present challenges for the stepfamily couples. Finally, a synthesis of the findings related to the dichotomous dimensions generates a theory of shared parenting values expectancy.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Creating stepfamilies through remarriage is no longer an uncommon American family experience. Approximately half of the marriages in the U.S. represent remarriages for at least one adult, and 65% of those adults bring at least one child into the marriage (Chadwick & Heaton, 1999). Further, one in three Americans is a stepparent, a stepchild, a stepsibling or otherwise related to a stepfamily (Larson, 1992). It is projected that approximately 60% of the population will become a stepfamily member at some point in their lifetime (Coleman, Ganong & Weaver, 2001; Ganong, Coleman & Weaver, 2002). The increase in the prevalence of stepfamily formation has led to an increase in the research in this area. Ganong and Coleman (2004), estimate that the total number of research publications on stepfamilies has quadrupled since the mid-1990s.

A relatively recent research focus on stepfamilies is the coparenting relationship in joint-custody arrangements. Since the 1970s, joint custody has become an increasingly popular option for divorcing parents and many state courts presently have either a preference or a presumption for this arrangement (Bender, 1994; Folberg, 1991; Mason, Fine, & Carnochan, 2004; Schepard, 2004). This development is attributed to judicial interpretations of social science research findings, and to activism for children's and fathers' rights that advocated for laws and policies which gave divorced fathers more access to their children (Mason, Fine & Carnochan, 2004; Schepard, 2004).

Most research on joint custody and its impact on families has focused on outcomes for children. To illustrate, Bauserman's (2002) meta-analysis of child adjustment in joint versus sole-custody arrangements was able to draw upon thirty-three studies conducted between 1980 and 2001. This is in sharp contrast to only two studies which include a look at the impact of joint custody on the remarriage (see Bredefeld, 1985; Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). Although a few more studies have looked at coparenting and its reciprocal effects on children and adults, most of the research has also focused on outcomes for children (see Amato, 2000; Belski, Putnam & Pruett, 1996; Heatherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Pruett et al., 2003), and when outcomes for adults with a coparenting arrangement are the subject of research, it is more often the relationship between former spouses, and their individual adjustment that is studied (see Adamsons & Pasley, 2006). However, custody arrangements of stepchildren may impact remarriage (Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

The potential impact of joint custody and coparenting on the marital relationship in remarriage is attributed largely to the level of interaction and involvement required between the two joint-custody households. Such an arrangement necessitates more communication and involvement with former spouses than if either parent had sole custody (Bredefeld, 1985; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Most often labeled "co-parenting" and sometimes "co-raising" (see Braithwaite, McBride & Schrodtt, 2003), this greater cross-household communication and involvement may thus introduce more complexity and stress to the stepcouple (Ganong & Coleman, 2004) and more conflict and problems adjusting to their remarriage (Bredefeld, 1985; Ganong & Coleman, 2004) since they must navigate more difficult roles and more ambiguous boundaries than do their sole-

custody counterparts (Bredefeld, 1985; Stewart, 2005; Stewart, 2007). Considering that this complex and challenging cross-household coparenting interaction is becoming more common, yet understudied, and is suggested to have an effect on the marriage of stepfamily couples, it is without a doubt an important phenomenon that deserves more attention in scholarly inquiry.

### Statement of the Problem

There are three main objectives for this study. The first objective is to determine the characteristics of coparenting or shared parenting communication for stepfamily couples, also referred to as stepcouples. Specifically, the study will examine the conditions surrounding the shared parenting communication, including the involvement of each of the parent partners within a stepcouple, as well as the characteristics of this communication. This study also examines the experiences stepcouples have with sharing parenting across households by eliciting jointly-told narratives about these experiences. Because these experiences can have an impact on the stepcouple marriage, this study also investigates the relationship between stepcouple marital satisfaction, and the nature of their shared parenting communication, including the narratives told about the experience.

Stepcouples' shared parenting communication and experience is the central focus of this inquiry. Research on coparenting communication within the stepfamily is very limited, with only one study to date having been completed on the specific topic. Braithwaite, McBride, and Schrodtt (2003) examined various aspects of shared parenting communication by utilizing diaries of stepparents and bioparents who had recorded the frequency, duration and topics of their conversations. They determined that the couples had an average of six shared parenting interactions over the two-week study. They also

found that these couples had low levels of conflict, and consequently referred to them as "parent teams." Because twelve of their 22 respondents were stepparents, we can presume that they were involved in the shared parenting interactions, though the interaction initiation information presented in the study did not identify the respondents by parent role. There is thus no research that specifically addresses the participation of the stepparent in the shared parenting relationship and communication across households.

In addition to considering the applied nature of the cross-household communication, this inquiry examines the ways in which stepcouples make sense of and together manage this experience. It identifies specific narrative themes and discursive practices which are employed by stepcouples to describe their experience with co-raising a child or children with other adults, namely joint-custody biological parents and their spouses. Conjoint family narratives will be examined in order to gain more insight into this shared parenting experience. Narratives are the stories people tell to structure their lives and make them meaningful (Fisher, 1987; Sunwolf & Frey, 2001); because it is in the stories we tell that we construct our reality and our relationships (Berger & Kellner, 1964; 1994). Such family narratives are instrumental in helping the family members make sense of their world, provide guidelines for their interaction, and create shared knowledge about their relationships (Fiese & Sameroff, 1999). By examining the stories stepcouples tell about their shared parenting experiences, whether positive, negative, or neutral, we can begin to understand the ways in which their accounts and stories may be related to their family, marital and/or parental realities and identities.

Knowledge of these narrative practices can illuminate the ways in which stepcouples manage this necessary cross-household involvement, are impacted by this

interaction, and make sense of it. Part of the evaluation of the impact of shared parenting involves identifying the levels of marital satisfaction of these couples as well as their perceived challenges with their shared parenting situation. Thus, this study also examines the possible relationship between the stepcouples' experiences with shared parenting and their marital satisfaction level.

In sum, sharing parenting and communicating across households is now a normative experience for many Americans in stepfamilies. When stepchildren live in two homes, sharing parenting necessitates a greater involvement with ex-partners, requiring more interaction between the adults in the children's multiple residences. Increased stress and more conflict are potentially experienced in this stepcouple's marriage, presumably due to this greater coparenting involvement. Very little research has been conducted on the impact shared parenting and the level of involvement across households has on the marital satisfaction of stepcouples. This study attempts to address this deficiency. It also seeks to identify the characteristics of this interaction as well as how talk about this interaction constructs stepcouples' coparenting reality. This research contributes to theories and understandings of cross-household shared parenting and the communication utilized. Findings from this research may assist individuals, as well as practitioners in clinical settings to better understand and support stepcouples who are co-raising children in a joint-custody setting.

### Literature Review

This review of the literature has the following objectives: 1) examine remarriage and the factors which influence marital outcomes, 2) consider joint custody and its impact on stepfamily members including stepfamily couples, 3) examine post-divorce shared

parenting and the effects of this on stepfamily members including stepfamily couples, 4) explore shared parenting communication for stepcouples including the role of stepparents in coparenting across households, and 5) establish the theoretical perspective from which this research proceeds. A summary of the literature and research questions regarding coparenting across households for stepcouples will then follow.

### *Theoretical Framework*

To accomplish the research objectives, a social constructionist perspective along with systems theory guided this inquiry. A constitutive perspective invokes a metatheoretical model in which many communication theories may interrelate (Craig, 1999, 2007). The two theories complement each other well in framing a theoretical approach to family research (Puig, Koro-Ljungberg, & Echevarria-Doan, 2008; Yerby, 1995). Families, including marital relationships and shared parenting relationships are relational systems which are socially constructed. The compatibility between social construction and family systems for family communication research will become clear in the following overview of the theoretical framework.

### *Social Construction*

The perspective maintaining that events, objects, and relationships in the world are creations of social processes is known as social constructionism. As developed by Berger and Luckmann (1966) in their treatise *The Social Construction of Reality*, social construction theory proposes that social reality is a shared construction created by participants in a relationship. This theory set the stage for what has become the "social constructionist movement" (Gergen, 1985) in the social sciences. Berger and Luckmann's model of social construction details the intersubjective processes by which

realities are constructed. However, the movement in social constructionism has resulted in the creation of various versions of the social construction of reality. There are, though, some common assumptions among the varying versions (Penman, 1992; Shotter & Gergen, 1994). First, however, an overview of Berger and Luckmann's model of a social construction *process* involving three simultaneous "moments" including 1) society is a human product, 2) society is an objective reality, and 3) humans are a social product, will be presented.

Society is a human product. As people go about their daily lives, acting and being acted upon, perceiving and being perceived by others, they develop behaviors that become "habitualized." These habits eventually develop into patterns, where "meanings involved become embedded as routines" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 53), actions become predictable, and eventually habitual actions become "typified"—shared by multiple members of society. Such reciprocal typifications become social expectations, what Berger and Luckmann refer to as institutionalization. "To say that a segment of human activity has been institutionalized is to already say that this segment of activity has been subsumed under social control" (p. 55). This social process by which personal knowledge is transferred to others and becomes an institution of social order is called *externalization*. Society is produced by humans in the course of their "ongoing externalization."

Society is an objective reality. Institutions which began as typified habits, eventually become legitimized. "Legitimation produces new meanings that serve to integrate the meanings already attached to disparate institutional processes" (p. 92). What has become an institution must be reproduced and passed on and taught to new members

of society (e.g., future generations). It is a further embedding of social order through justification in that "[l]egitimation 'explains' the institutional order by ascribing the cognitive validity to its objectivated meanings" (p. 93). Eventually these institutions become "permanent" social facts. When they are seen as natural and unquestionable "things" rather than human phenomena, these institutions and institutional roles are considered to be "reified." "Another way of saying this is that reification is the apprehension of the products of human activity as if they were something else than human products—such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will" (p. 89). Berger and Luckmann used the term *objectivation* to describe the process by which an institution is transformed into a natural social fact.

Humans are a social product. The objectivated social world is eventually introjected into the consciousness of individuals through socialization. That is, interactions with other members of society construct individual's subjective realities (such as identity, marriage, and shared parenting). So to be an individual member of society is to "internalize" society as an objective reality. "What is real 'outside' becomes what is real 'within'" (p. 133). The process of *internalization* is "the immediate apprehension or interpretation of an objective event as expressing meaning, that is, as a manifestation of another's subjective processes which thereby becomes subjectively meaningful to myself" (p. 129). Meaning-making does not require agreement or complete understanding of an Other's subjective reality. It is also not autonomous. "We not only live in the same world, we participate in each other's being" (p. 130).

We are also co-participants or co-creators of our relational identities and realities. That is, through interactions with one another, participants in the interaction come to co-

create and to sustain their relational realities. Berger and Kellner, (1964, 1994) assert that this process occurs primarily in the family and especially in the marital conversations within the family. They maintain that in marital partners' repeatedly "talking through" their conceptions of their experiences they form or invent a consensual reality for their marriage and their family. "Typically, the reality that has been 'invented' within the marital conversation is subjectively perceived as a 'discovery.' Thus, the partners 'discover' themselves and the world, 'who they really are,' 'what they really believe,' 'how they really feel, and what have always felt, about so-and-so'" (Berger & Kellner, 1994, p. 29).

Gergen (1994) takes this relational perspective further by suggesting that a social constructionist approach should begin with a starting point at the level of human relationship. That is, utterances only have meaning when there is a "response." No meaning can be generated without relational embedding. Gergen (1994, pp. 264-271) posits seven assumptions based on this *communal* approach: 1) an individual's utterances in themselves possess no meaning, 2) the potential for meaning is realized through supplementary action, 3) supplements act to create and constrain meaning, 4) any supplement (or action-and-supplement) is a candidate for further supplementation, 5) meanings are subject to continuous reconstitution via the expanding domain of supplementation, 6) as relationships are increasingly coordinated (ordered), so do ontologies and their instantiations develop, and 7) as consensus is established, so are the grounds for both understanding and misunderstanding. Because the social construction perspective places relational communication as central to the invention of relational reality, it is well-suited to frame an inquiry into family dynamics.

A social constructionist inquiry into an invented family reality may include, but is of course not limited to, a conception of relational satisfaction, marital and family identity maintenance and construction, conflict management, and shared parenting. For example, a stepcouple in their repeated conversations about their shared parenting experiences constructs the meaning of that shared parenting in their marriage. "When family members are called upon to recount an experience, they set an interpretive frame reflecting how individuals grapple with understanding events, how the family works together, and how the ascription of meaning is linked to beliefs about relationships in the family and social world" (Fiese and Sameroff, 1999, p. 3). This relationship between reality and meaning in family communication can be characterized as a loop in that the communication within the family determines the family reality, and the family reality affects the communication within the family (see Shotter, 1993). Thus, the accounts of experiences, such as stepcouple coparenting, are reality-constructing practices and products, and can provide insight into the meaning these experiences have for these couples.

Accounts people give or stories people tell structure their life experience and make it meaningful. In fact, so central to the human experience is storytelling that scholars refer to human beings as "homo narans" (Fisher, 1987). Human beings tell about and interpret experiences such as thinking, perceiving and imagining in narrative structures (Sarbin, 1986; Sarbin, 1998). "We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe doubt, plan, revise, criticize, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative" (Hardy, 1968). Among activities accomplished through narrative communication or conversational storytelling are the construction of

relationships (Berger & Kellner, 1964, 1994; Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004; Reiss, 1989; Wambolt & Wolin, 1989; Wambolt, 1999), as well as self and identity (Langellier, 1989; Davies & Harre, 1990; Shaw, 1997; Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Sunwolf & Frey, 2001), and family identities (Koenig Kellas, 2005; Langellier & Peterson, 2004; Linde, 1993; Norrick, 1997; Schiffrin, 1996). Stepcouples' descriptions of their experiences with coparenting in a joint-custody arrangement are co-constructed narratives. These narratives or stories that stepcouples tell about these experiences provide insight into their identities, both individual and relational and into their co-constructed relationships, including satisfaction in them.

### *Systems Theory*

Systems Theory as it is applied to family relationships has its origins in General Systems Theory (GST), which is a framework used to explain how a set of individual yet interrelated components of a system work together to produce an outcome. According to GST a whole system cannot be understood by analyzing its parts; it must be analyzed in its entirety. Among phenomena which can be considered systems include the human body, a machine, and a family. A system is simply a "set of elements standing in interrelation among themselves and with the environment" (Bertalanffy, 1975, p. 159). As such, GST has broad application possibilities and has been utilized in "systemic study in fields as disparate as mathematics, biology, and robotics, as well as sociology and family studies" (Galvin, Dickson, & Marrow, 2006, p. 310). Indeed, Whitchurch and Constantine (1993) recognized that systems theories serve to unify the sciences in that they apply across academic boundaries and between the social and natural sciences.

While Bertalanffy (1950; 1968; 1975) is considered to be the pioneer of GST, it is the work of the Palo Alto Group (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967) as well as the work of Murray Bowen (1960) and Gregory Bateson et al. (1956) on systems in families of children with schizophrenia, who connected systems theories with ongoing family and relational interaction systems. These scholars led the way toward a holistic approach to therapy, focusing on the family rather than solely on the individual. This systems approach to family therapy helped focus attention toward family systems in family communication research. "The role of systems theory in the development of early marital and family communication research was crucial as it centered attention on the holistic nature of interaction patterns as opposed to attending to individual family members" (Galvin, Dickson, and Marrow, 2006, p. 310). In such an approach, members of families are considered as parts of an overall whole, a constructed pattern, rather than as individuals. Acknowledging that several scholars have stressed different sets of characteristics for family systems (see Broderick, 1993; Galvin, Bylund & Brommel, 2004; Littlejohn, 2002; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993; White and Klein, 2002), Galvin, Dickson & Marrow (2006) identify seven which are most salient. These include 1) interdependence, 2) wholeness, 3) patterns/regularities, 4) interactive complexity, 5) openness, 6) relational complexity, and 7) equifinality. The authors' conceptualization of these family systems characteristics are explained in the following sections.

*Interdependence.* Within any system, no element is independent from the others. All the elements are dependent upon one another for their functioning. When thinking of systems in family terms, any significant change in one family member affects every other member of the family. A developmental change, such as adolescence for example, will

have an impact on other family members. When a child becomes more autonomous the other family members must adjust to this new development. Parents may need to modify their level of control over how the adolescent spends his or her time, a younger sibling may need to find a new playmate, and an older sibling may gain a new companion. The behaviors of family members are interrelated and depend upon the behavior of other family members. Similarly, relationships within families, are considered family subsystems, such as the marital relationship or coparenting relationship, and can also affect other family relationships within the system (see O'Connor, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1997).

*Wholeness.* In the systems perspective families have a holistic quality where the parts (or members) are considered as an integrated whole. The common metaphor for the characteristic of wholeness in systems theory is that of a cake, where the whole cake is entirely different from the parts that comprise it, flour, eggs, sugar, and butter. Additionally, each whole family is unique because the behaviors and patterns of relationships are different from any other (Littlejohn, 2002). The interplay of individuals results in a unique whole family characteristic, even though the individual members may not take on all of the attributes that comprise the whole family. Whitchurch and Constantine (1993) describe this phenomenon as emergents or emergent properties because they emerge only at the systemic level from the interactions in that particular family arrangement. Though families are made up of individuals, their interrelated behavior is a unique family creation greater than their individual beings.

*Patterns/Regularities.* Families have patterns of behavior which are coordinated and make life more predictable and thus manageable as discussed by Galvin, Dickson, &

Marrow (2006). The authors add that patterns create regularity through rules for communication which define a range of acceptable behavior. Such rules set guidelines and limitations for behaviors of family members. For example, a communication rule in a stepfamily may be that the children who spend time in two homes do not share private information with the adults in their other home. Since families sometimes attempt to maintain stability, they are constantly "calibrated" through feedback systems to maintain and regulate the communication pattern rules. Such feedback may either maintain the current system or it may change the system. Due to unpredictable and developmental changes, families and their interaction patterns are dynamic, in a constant state of flux.

*Interactive complexity.* The systems perspective on families sees the context of the interaction pattern as more important than individual responsibility for it. In other words, a systems perspective on families removes the blame and responsibility for "who started it" by making all participants responsible. Because all behaviors are interrelated and interdependent, no one individual or action can be to blame for the patterns of communication which develop. "[E]ach action simultaneously triggers new behavior and responds to a previous behavior" (Galvin, Dickson & Marrow, 2006, p. 313). Thus, even if a triggering event or behavior could be located, the responses to the triggering behavior have contributed to the current state. This view is referred to as the "illness-free" approach to view relationships (Duncan & Rock, 1993; as cited in Galvin, Dickson & Marrow, 2006). Family issues are thus viewed as patterns of behavior to which all members contribute.

*Openness.* Family systems are open and thus interact with their environment. Families are embedded within a larger social system, which can include educational,

political, and health systems as well as social and family systems, with whom the family system interacts. There are people, ideas and information constantly flowing back and forth across the family boundary from the larger social system. Thus, there is a constant interchange between the family system and its surrounding environment. All families are open systems, but they differ with regard to how open they are and with regard to what they are open to. Some families, for example, may set boundaries on what information comes into the family system by shielding their children from television and the internet in order to control interchange with the environment, while others may encourage it. Some stepfamily members may set boundaries on what information flows outside of the system by concealing information from a child who lives in two homes as a way to protect the privacy of a family member from the adults in the child's other home. "Although boundaries may be strong, flexible, or almost non-existent, families require some level of interchange with the environment to manage growth and change" (Galvin, Dickson & Marrow, 2006, p. 314).

*Relational complexity.* Families involve complex relationships of systems embedded within systems. This can include extended family systems, which have family subsystems and the family subsystems have internal dyadic or triadic subsystems. In such a scenario the extended family might include a set of grandparents, their two children, and their children's spouses with their one child each. The extended family is a system and embedded with that is the two subsystems of the other adults and their children. Within these subsystems are the parental/marital subsystem and the parent-child subsystem. Each system and subsystem has its own unique patterns and characteristics.

Each subsystem relationship may affect the other. Alliances and coalitions may develop as dyads or triads as members of one subsystem seek to influence another or others.

Coalitions, especially coalitions of two insiders and an outsider may form as members align strongly, establishing highly stable interaction patterns. When a two person relationship is stressful, the members frequently draw in a third person to serve as a focal point of attention, relieving the stress on the original pair. (Galvin, Dickson, & Marrow, 2006, p. 314)

Just as individual members of families interact to create interaction patterns characteristic of a unique family, so do family subsystems (comprised of individuals) interact in complex ways to create complex family relationships.

*Equifinality.* Families are goal oriented and may undergo multiple paths to get to the same end point of achieving their goal. For example, there are many different ways a family can become "happy" or "healthy" or "wealthy." To say a family system exhibits equifinality means that the same outcomes may be achieved from different origins (Littlejohn, 2002; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967) and through different approaches (Littlejohn, 2002). There are many points at which one can begin the journey toward the goal and many ways one can travel. Littlejohn (2002) elaborates on the process of equifinality:

The adaptable system can achieve that goal under a variety of environmental conditions. The system is capable of processing inputs in different ways to produce its output. If one pathway fails, another one can take its place. If one process gets cut off, another process steps in. Smart parents, for example, know that children's behavior can be affected by a variety of techniques, that family decision making can occur in more than one way, and that children learn several methods for securing the compliance of the adults in their world. (p. 41)

Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) point out that just as initial conditions or causes can lead to the same outcomes for families, so too can different outcomes be produced by the same causes. Thus, again, the systems approach to families emphasizes that it is the

ongoing interaction which is important to the family outcome, rather than any individual triggering event or behavior.

Family systems theory and its framework of characteristics, as described above, have been applied to a variety of studies of family relationships. For example, systems theory has been used to study parent-child relationships (e.g., Cummings & Davies, 1995; Hauser et al., 1991; Radke-Yarrow et al., 1995), sibling relationships (e.g., Brody et al., 1992; Hetherington, 1988, Volling & Belsky, 1992) as well as marital relationships (e.g., Emery 1982; Fitzpatrick, 1988; Katz & Gottman, 1995; Rogers, 1972). The work of Rogers (1972) applied systems theory to the use of relational control to gain power in a marriage. This study is significant also in that it focused on communication by identifying message exchanges within the marital system which were used to influence a spouse. Similarly, Fitzpatrick's (1988) work applied systems theory to identify couple typologies which were produced in part through communication behaviors. The couple types include 1) *traditionals*, who exhibit conventional values, traditional roles, stability and companionship; 2) *independents*, who exhibit non-conventional values and roles, autonomy, different personal and psychological space, and companionship; and 3) *separates*, who exhibit conventional values but are ambivalent toward them, conflict suppression, and little companionship.

Family systems theory is also well-suited to study stepfamily relationships as it can help explain the complex composition and exchanges within them. Emery (1999) asserts that divorce and remarriage is most effectively examined from a systems perspective. Indeed, several studies have taken this perspective to examine stepfamilies. The family system's approach to stepfamilies includes studies on the effect of remarriage

on child behavior and the parent-child relationship (e.g., Bray, 1988; Hetherington, 1988); the effect of coparenting relationships on outcomes for children (e.g., Amato, 2000; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Pruett et al., 2003), the effect of the coparenting relationship on outcomes for adults (e.g., Amato, 2000; Bouchard & Lee, 2000; Fagan & Barnett, 2003), and the effects of the biological parent coparenting relationship on the remarriage (e.g., Bredefield, 1984; Clingempeel, 1981; Guisinger, Cowan, & Schuldberg, 1989).

### *A Social Constructionist Approach to Family Systems*

Although groundbreaking as an approach to studying families from a whole rather than individual perspective, family systems theory has been criticized for constraints it places on interpretive research. Yerby (1995) identifies five concerns with family systems theory: 1) the emphasis on homeostasis and patterns rather than change, 2) ignoring the individual perspective at the expense of the family perspective, 3) the potential for gender bias, 4) the potential for cultural bias, and 5) the researcher's position as the objective-observer. The criticisms are largely centered on the limiting epistemological perspective of family systems theory. Ways of knowing can shape interpretations of, for example, in what ways systems are too open or too closed (i.e., gendered epistemology), which roles are appropriate for parents and children (i.e., cultural epistemology), what role the researcher plays in the system (e.g., objective-observer or system participant), and what is the desired family state (e.g., stable or changeable) (Yerby, 1995). In addition, family systems theory ignores the self in the system and the interchange between the individual self and the relationship (Nichols, 1987).

Thus, Yerby (1995) argues for a constructionist family systems perspective to correct the family systems theory constraints. Such an approach incorporates social construction and dialectical perspectives in examining family systems. Dialectics involve meanings which emerge from opposite forces and alternative perspectives (Baxter, 1988; Bochner 1984; Montgomery, 1992; Rawlins, 1992). Alternate views of "reality" are invited when the constructionist perspective of systems theory is utilized. "Consistent with a social constructionist view, one can also explore alternative and opposing perspectives within the same system, listen to different experiences of a shared event, heal the schisms, and co-construct stories" (Yerby, 1995, p. 351). The social constructionist approach to family systems is thus reflexive in order to account for cultural and gender bias, the linguistically constructed reality as opposed to an objective reality, and the researcher as part of the system. Dialectics also acknowledges change, rather than stability in family systems (Yerby, 1995) and this evolutionary model of family systems has been incorporated into current views of family systems (see Galvin, Dickson, & Marrow, 2006). Finally, the social constructionist view of family systems recognizes the interdependence between the self and the system. Yerby (1995) explains that

We cannot know what it means to be an individual without simultaneously knowing what it means to be connected to other systems. In our culture, at least, our connectedness is made possible by our individuation and our individuation is achieved through the quality of our connections. (p. 351)

Similarly, Paig, Koro-Ljungberg and Echevarria-Doan (2008) maintain that a social constructionist approach to family systems recognizes individual identity as a by-product of socialization in context.

The constructionist family systems perspective is a reflexive approach by the researcher in order to honor the meaning-making process of family interaction in systems. Additionally, "[a] social constructionist and dialectical perspective of communication leads to an exploration of what people *do* in the process of generating meanings — and what they *do* is to construct and co-construct narratives" (Yerby, 1995, p. 360). This approach thus lends itself well to achieving the purpose of this research which is primarily to explore, through the stories they tell about the experience, what shared parenting means for stepfamily couples. These stories that stepcouples tell about shared parenting provide insight into how they make sense of this in their relationship and in their family roles, as well as what it means for them. Additionally, it provides a framework for exploring boundaries, patterns and complexities of shared parenting constructed and experienced by stepcouples. Therefore, this project utilizes a constructionist systems theory perspective to explore relevant systems characteristics in shared parenting systems as well as sense-making about this process for stepcouples. The remaining sections will discuss concepts and literature relevant to shared parenting for stepcouples.

### *Remarriage/Stepcoupling*

A significant body of literature has been published on the quality and satisfaction of remarriage. Research into these two phenomena has shown that although the marital satisfaction in remarriage is not different than that of first marriage, remarriage has a higher rate of instability (Ganong & Coleman 1994; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Segrin & Flora, 2005). In order to account for this seeming paradox, Ganong and Coleman (2004) have outlined three hypotheses offered for the relative instability of remarriages despite

equivalent levels of marital satisfaction: 1) selection factors, 2) evolutionary explanations, and 3) interpersonal causes. Selection factors are those attributes of a person which may make them poor candidates for marriage. Such factors might include attitudes and expectations, alcoholism, risk-taking, and poor problem solving skills for example. Evolutionary explanations imply that it is part of genetic make-up to seek partners to provide offspring and protection. Interpersonal causes refer to stepfamily dynamics, including the presence of stepchildren, type of custody arrangement, and the former spouse relationship.

Researchers who hypothesize that interpersonal factors influence remarriage stability highlight the highly complex nature of stepfamilies and stepfamily dynamics. Stepfamily couples are in the unique position of forming their bond in the presence of stepchildren and extended kin and may find it challenging to set boundaries around the new remarriage (Coleman & Ganong, 1995; Pasley, 1987). Some research has found that the presence of stepchildren influence stepcouple functioning in a negative way (Clingempeel & Brand, 1985; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1982), but other research has not found this influence (Koepke, Hare, & Moran, 1992; Schultz, Schultz, & Olson, 1991). Also, some research has found that the presence of stepchildren destabilizes remarriages (Rogers, 1999; Tzeng & Mare, 1995), while others have not found that stepchildren influence marital stability (Castro Martin & Bumpass, 1989; Furstenburg & Spanier, 1984). The influence of stepchildren on remarriage stability may be more complex than simply their presence. Ganong and Coleman (2004) elaborate on the factors involving stepchildren which may influence marital stability in stepfamily couples:

Clearly household and couple dynamics are different when stepchildren are present, compared to when they are not. The question is whether the presence of children from prior unions destabilizes adult couple relationships and/or lowers their quality. The influence of children as interested third parties to their parents' remarriages and other romantic unions is not likely to be insignificant, depending on such factors as emotional closeness of parents and children, the ages and genders of children and the romantically involved parent and stepparent, and the nature of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. (p. 91-92)

A stepfamily is formed when a marriage occurs between people and at least one partner has brought children to the relationship from a previous one. This adds unique and complex dimensions to the marriage with regard to role boundaries. For example, the lack of socially prescribed norms and legal rights for stepparents is often seen as the cause of stress encountered by many stepfamilies (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). There is no norm for how involved a stepparent should be in the parenting of stepchildren and this ambiguity can cause complications for stepfamily dynamics. To illustrate, Segrin and Flora (2005), explain the complexities of the stepmother's role in the following passage:

In many families stepmothers occupy a precarious role. They are expected to form good relationships with the children and get involved in their care—but not too involved. When either biological parent pursues interaction with the children, stepmothers may be expected to step back, never having all of the rights and privileges of a regular mother. (p. 285)

Without the presence of stepchildren there would be no stepfamily, nor would there be interested third parties in an intimate position to threaten the boundaries of the newly formed marriage. There would be no stepparent role to negotiate. Also, former spouses would not present any issue with regard to parenting roles and boundaries for the remarried partners. These are important differences in stepfamilies because they add complexities that would not otherwise be present in the marriage. The remaining sections

elaborate on joint custody and coparenting complications as further potential interpersonal causes of marital instability for stepfamily couples.

### *Child Custody Arrangements*

To better grasp the implications of coparenting for stepcouples, it is useful to understand and differentiate between the various types of custody arrangements which are possible. The term "custody" refers to "a parent's legal right to control his or her child's upbringing" (Schepard, 2004, p. 12) and can mean legal or physical custody, or both. Physical custody refers to a child's primary residence and indicates which parent is responsible for the child's care, whereas legal custody refers to decision-making rights for the parent such as medical treatments, education, and religion (Schepard, 2004). Folberg (1991) identifies four custody arrangements which include sole custody, split custody, divided custody and joint custody. Folberg explains that sole custody refers to one parent having both legal and physical custody with visitation rights given to the non-residential parent. Split custody occurs when sole custody of one or more children is given to one parent and the remaining children are put in custody of the other. Divided custody is sometimes also referred to as alternating custody, and it involves each of the children spending reciprocal time with each parent and that parent has exclusive control over the child during that time. This type of custody most often occurs when the parent's homes are separated geographically.

Joint custody is also referred to as shared parenting and it means that both parents have legal responsibility and care for the child. Folberg (1991) elaborates on the distinguishing features of joint custody:

Joint custody basically means providing each parent with an equal voice in the children's education, upbringing, religious training, non-emergency medical care, and general welfare. The parent with whom the child is residing at the time must make immediate and day-to-day decisions regarding discipline, grooming, diet, activities, scheduling social contacts, and emergency care. (p. 7)

The term joint custody is not clearly defined with regard to degrees of legal and physical rights of the parents. Joint custody can mean, for example, equally shared decision making and time, it can mean joint legal custody and visitation with one of the parents, or it can mean decision making is divided between the parents with regard to the type of decision (e.g., medical, religious, educational) (Schepard, 2004). While sole custody dominated courts decisions in the past two centuries, joint custody has come more into favor in recent decades. This change toward a greater degree of equality between the parents is attributed to three developments: 1) the increased entry of women into the work force, 2) the push for legal equality of the sexes, and 3) empirical evidence establishing the importance of fathers in children's lives (Schepard, 2004).

The advent of joint versus sole custody as a more customary arrangement in stepfamilies has had an impact on the quality of stepfamily life. While the arrangement suggests better outcomes for children and their parents (Bauserman, 2002), it results in more complexity and role ambiguity for stepfamily members (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Joint custody means more involvement with the former spouse living in another household. Because the stepchildren of stepfamilies are members of two households, it renders the boundaries more permeable and necessitates communication with the former spouse about shared time with the children. This communication may be challenging and difficult for those former spouses who have a hostile relationship (Gerlach, 2002).

In addition, stepfamilies with a joint custody agreement do not have sole control over parenting decisions which affect them yet which must be shared with the former spouse. For example, the stepcouple does not have complete control over where the children spend the holidays, what sports and other activities they participate in and when, how or when the child is disciplined in the other household, how child support sent to the other household is spent, etc. Stepouples often feel uneasy without complete control over the decisions about children residing in their household (Hetherington and Kelly, 2002) and may attempt to exclude the other household by closing boundaries as a way to gain control (Coale Lewis, 1985). Such attempts to exclude the other household can lead to more conflict between former spouses (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Joint-custody arrangements, while beneficial to children and adults who are biologically linked, can present problems for stepfamilies that must coparent across households.

#### *Post-divorce Coparenting*

Coparenting is a term most often used to identify parental decision-making involvement around child-raising issues. Researchers have used the term when looking at biological parent involvement in both married and divorced couples' child-raising. Research into both of these types of relationships revealed coparenting behavioral categories according to patterns of antagonism and supportiveness (Adamsons & Pasley, 2006). However, the current trend toward joint custody has led researchers, practitioners and policymakers to become more interested in post-divorce coparenting (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), and research into coparenting after divorce suggests more than two types of coparenting relationships. For example, Ahrons and Rogers (1987) identified five categories: 1) perfect pals, who have a friendship and are cooperative in all area; 2)

cooperative colleagues, who cooperate with regard to coparenting but have few interactions or are highly conflictual in their interpersonal interactions; 3) angry associates, who have a hostile relationship but still attempt to cooperate with regard to coparenting and limit their interactions to avoid the conflict; 4) fiery foes, who are extremely hostile in their coparental and personal relationship; and 5) dissolved duos, who sever contact entirely and may even relocate geographically.

Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) found four types of post-divorce coparental relationships: 1) conflicted, who had high levels of antagonism and low levels of support and which comprised one third of their sample; 2) cooperative, who had high levels of support and low levels of antagonism and comprised one fourth of the sample; 3) parallel, who have low levels of support and low levels of antagonism, tending to minimize coparenting interactions, and comprised one third of the sample; and 4) mixed, who had both high levels of supportive and antagonistic coparenting, and comprised approximately 1/12th of the sample. Overall research into post-divorce coparenting suggests that parallel coparenting is the most common type and that conflictual and supportive types move into patterns of parallel coparenting over time (Adamsons and Pasley, 2006).

Some of the more recent research on post-divorce coparenting has begun to explore the impact of coparenting on stepfamily outcomes, and most of the focus has been on the outcomes for children (Adamsons & Pasley, 2006). Findings largely highlight the negative impacts on children that stem from antagonistic overt and covert behavior between parents (Amato, 2000). For example, children who witness interparental conflict tend to have more emotional distress and behavioral problems, and

those who witness denigration of the former spouse experience higher levels of distress. As might be expected, supportive coparental behavior is linked to more positive outcomes for children, as found by Hetherington & Clingempeel (1992). The authors noted that children who witnessed their biological parents exhibiting less hostility and more supportiveness had fewer behavioral problems. A similar outcome has been identified for the adults involved in coparenting. Antagonistic coparenting is associated with poorer well-being in adults, whereas supportive coparenting is associated with greater well-being (Amato, 2000). Thus, outcomes for adults and children are similar when it comes to the potential antagonistic versus supportive qualities of the coparenting relationship.

Research on the relationship between stepcouple functioning and biological parent coparenting is quite limited. There is some indication that remarriage has an adverse effect on the biological coparental relationship. When former spouses remarry, there tends to be more hostility and less cooperation between the former spouses, especially when it is only the father who remarries (Hetherington, 2003). In addition, remarriage is related to less frequent contact between coparents (Christensen & Rettig, 1995). What is yet to be determined is whether or not these patterns are temporary and the former partners eventually adjust into more positive coparenting interactions or if these patterns are stable over time.

There is evidence of a reciprocal relationship between these phenomena as the coparental relationship also impacts remarriage. Some research has found that stepcouple marital quality is adversely affected by a hostile coparenting relationship between the remarried wife and her ex-spouse (Bredefeld, 1984). Guisinger, Cowan, and Schuldberg,

1989) had similar findings in their study of stepcouples and the remarried husband's ex-spouse. They found that the husband's ex-spouse was a greater source of stress on the stepcouple than the children were. In addition, the negative perceptions of the ex-spouse were related to lower marital satisfaction for the stepcouple. Clingempeel (1981) discovered that those spouses with moderate amounts of contact with former spouses reported higher levels of marital satisfaction than those with low or high amounts of contact. However, Clingempeel and Brand (1985) were unable to replicate these findings, and perhaps a consideration of more than frequency of interaction is necessary to determine the impact of coparenting on the stepcouple marriage. Among other factors that may influence this relationship are the quality of the interaction between the partners, the purpose of the interaction, and the outcome of the interaction (Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

### *Stepparents and Coparenting*

Although there is ample research on coparenting in general and there is the beginning of research into the impact of coparenting on stepfamily life, rarely has research into coparenting after divorce considered an evaluation of the stepparent's role in this process. Indeed, definitions of coparenting often ignore the possibility of stepparents' involvement in decisions about the child who resides with them, as in this one provided by Ganong and Coleman (2004) who define coparenting after divorce as "both parents being involved in making decisions about their child's education, healthcare, religious training, and social activities (clubs, social organizations, sports)" (p. 45). The stepparent is notably absent in this description of parenting across a child's dual households, because "both parents" includes only the two (presumably biological or adoptive) parents. In

addition to including the terminology of "both parents" in the description of coparenting, Bonach (2005) refers to the participants as a "coparenting dyad" (p. 81). Regardless of the marital status of the former spouses, only two parents are considered to be participating in the sharing of parental responsibilities, again presumably the two biological or adoptive parents.

However, researchers recently have begun to look at the stepparent's participation in the cross-household coparenting of these children. In an analysis of diary entries describing various aspects of communication across coparenting households, Braithwaite, McBride, and Schrodtt (2003) sought to identify the characteristics of communication of "all the adults" who play roles in coparenting children, including the stepparent. They refer to these coparenting adults within both households as "parent teams" within the stepfamily system. While recognizing stepparents as participants in cross-household coparenting is an important step in examining the larger sphere of coparenting interaction, largely understudied is the nature of the involvement of stepparents in these events. Considering that many of the parenting decisions about their stepchildren would have an impact on them and their stepcouple relationship, it should not be surprising that stepparents participate in cross-household coparenting communication as well as coparenting decisions. The nature of this stepparent involvement, and the stepcouple's conceptualization of it as an important area of inquiry, has yet to be studied.

#### Rationale for Study and Research Questions

In sum, the relevant literature demonstrates that an increase in joint custody arrangements means more children are living in two households, and more stepcouples are experiencing the complex issues associated with the necessary increased involvement

with the other parents in their children's lives. These stepcouples do not have sole decision-making authority when it comes to plans that affect their day-to-day stepfamily life. They must consult with other adults about the childrearing issues (e.g., healthcare, education, school activities, religious training, etc.) that sole-custody couples may enjoy with full decision-making authority.

While research in this area is limited, there is some evidence which suggests that there is a reciprocal relationship between the biological parent coparenting and the stepcouple marital functioning. The stepcouple marriage can adversely affect the biological coparenting interactions, and the biological coparenting interactions can add stress to the stepcouple marriage. Very little research has included a look at the stepparent's role in cross-household communication and especially how stepcouples manage this welcome or unwelcome, but necessary involvement. Indeed, very little research has looked at the characteristics of coparenting communication. In order to better understand the stepcouple coparenting experience and stepparent involvement in coparenting, it was necessary to elicit from stepcouples their accounts of their experiences with coparenting across households. This study proposed the following research questions to produce the information necessary to determine the characteristics and experiences of cross-household coparenting for stepcouples and the possible impact of these on their marital quality.

### *Research Questions*

RQ1: What are the conditions and qualities of shared parenting communication for stepcouples?

This research question sought to explore the reported cross-household shared parenting communication engaged in by stepcouples with other adults co-raising children. The qualities of the shared parenting communication explored included the frequency, process and method of this communication, the identification of the parents involved in the communication, as well as the stepcouple's reported quality of the cross-household communication and their satisfaction with these interactions.

RQ2: What themes characterize the narratives stepcouples tell about cross-household shared parenting?

This question sought to provide insight into the types of narratives told about experiences these couples have with sharing parenting across households. The systematic grounded theory analysis of these couples' conjoint narratives provides insight into the shared parenting phenomenon as well as what it may mean in their relationship.

RQ3: What challenges do stepcouples experience with sharing parenting across households?

Due to the complex nature of stepfamily life in joint custody arrangements, stepcouples have the potential to experience unique challenges compared to other couples with children. This question is designed to help identify these challenges.

RQ4: What is the relationship between stepcouples' shared parenting narratives, shared parenting challenges, and marital satisfaction?

Due to the complex nature of stepfamily life in joint custody arrangements, stepcouples have the potential to experience unique family dynamics compared to other couples with children. This question sought to identify how narratives of the stepcouples' shared parenting experiences, the challenges they experience, and their marital satisfaction are related.

### Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to establish the foundation for this study examining various aspects of shared parenting for stepcouples. This chapter has outlined the theoretical approach to the study and the current relevant literature on coparenting for stepfamily couples. A social constructionist family systems approach was chosen in order to explore, through the stories they tell about the experience, relevant communication characteristics in shared parenting systems as well as sense-making about this process for stepcouples. In addition, this chapter outlined the relevant research on the instability of remarriage, the implications of joint custody for stepfamily couples, and coparenting dynamics in the stepfamily system.

The remaining chapters of this dissertation are organized as follows. Chapter II describes the methodological approach toward the study participants, data collection procedures and coding of the data. Chapter III presents the results of the study. These results include analyses of demographic data, narratives, and empirical data. Chapter IV includes a complete discussion of the results as well as an examination of the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER II

### METHODS AND PROCEDURES

In order to answer the questions about stepcouple shared parenting experiences, this research project utilized survey and demographic data and transcripts of audio taped in-depth interviews containing stepcouples' narratives about shared parenting and communicating across households. The narratives were explored by using an inductive, grounded theory approach, which entails a comparative analysis of systematically collected data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory analysis is well-suited to in-depth qualitative interviewing (Charmaz, 2002).

Though mainly inductive and interpretive in nature, this study employed a mixed methods design. In such a design, qualitative and quantitative methods are combined (Howe, 2004; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Multiple methods were used to collect multiple sources of data. Further, by utilizing a combination of narrative analysis and survey data collection this inquiry employed both methodological and data triangulation (see Denzin, 1978). Triangulation allows the researcher to obtain a thorough understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) and increases rigor, breadth and depth to an inquiry (Flick, 1998). Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) explain that the triangulation design is used when "a researcher wants to directly compare and contrast quantitative statistical results with qualitative findings or to validate or expand quantitative results with qualitative data" (p. 62). This chapter offers a further

overview of the study's participants, the data collection and analysis procedures, and the coding scheme utilized.

### Study Participants

Participants included in the study were married or cohabitating couples where one partner had at least one child from a previous relationship. The couples also needed to have a joint custody arrangement where the children were residents of each household for no less than 4 days and no more than 24 days in an average four-week period. The reason for this residential requirement was to attempt to include only those participants who were affected by joint custody to the degree that there was an adequate level of cross-household communication to be examined in the study.

### Demographic Data

There were a total of 32 couples who participated in the study. The mean age for the 64 participants was 38.5 years, with a range of 22 to 55 years. The mean age for women was 37.9, with a range of 22 to 53 years, and the mean age for men was 39, with a range of 22 to 55 years. The average annual household income for the couples was \$102,594, with a median of \$94,500 and a range of \$36,000 to \$380,000. Seventy-five percent of the participants were Caucasian ( $n = 48$ ), 10.9% were Hispanic ( $n = 7$ ), 7.8% were African-American ( $n = 5$ ), 3.1% were Asian ( $n = 2$ ), and 3.1% were Native-American ( $n = 2$ ). The education level of participants was as follows: 34.4% were college graduates ( $n = 22$ ), 23.4% had some college education ( $n = 15$ ), 23.4% were high school graduates ( $n = 15$ ), and 18.9% had a post-graduate degree ( $n = 12$ ),

The participants had been married or living as a stepfamily for an average of 5 years with a median of 5 years and range of 3 months to 12 years at the time of their

participation in the study. Twenty-five percent of the participants did not have any children from a previous union ( $n = 16$ ). Fifty percent of the couples were considered to be living in a complex stepfamily, where both adults had at least one child from a previous union. Of the participants who had children from a previous union, the average number of children was 1.9, with a range of one to four children. Several participants had adult children who were no longer living at home. The average age of the minor children from previous unions was eight years, with a range of three to seventeen years. More than a third (38%) of the couples had from their union together an average of 1.3 (range = 1 to 2) children whose average age was 2.75 years (range = 4 months to 10 years). The minor children who lived in two homes spent an average of 14 days in a four-week period living in the couple's home.

## Data Collection

### *Participants*

Purposive sampling was utilized to locate participants for this research project. This type of known-group sampling is desirable when possession of some characteristic (in this case a joint custody arrangement) is required for admission to the sample group (Reinard, 2007). Participant couples were thus recruited using the researcher's social network ( $n = 7$ ), the snowball method, where a qualified participant locates another through his or her social network (Arksey and Knight, 1999) ( $n = 1$ ), announcements made in classrooms ( $n = 1$ ), university and professional community listservs ( $n = 2$ ), a research recruitment service ( $n = 2$ ), ads in community newsletters ( $n = 1$ ) and online community classifieds ( $n = 18$ ). With the exception of two couples recruited through the

researcher's social network, all initial communication between researcher and participants occurred via email.

Once contact was made, the participants were screened to determine if they fit the participation criteria. Once they indicated they understood what the study entailed and had agreed to participate, they were emailed or mailed a consent form [See Appendix A] outlining the interview and survey protocol, the demographic and shared parenting characteristics questionnaire [See Appendix B] and the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test [see Appendix C]. They were asked to keep their responses to the survey questions confidential and to place the surveys in separate sealed envelopes before placing these in the return address stamped envelope. Participants who received the surveys via email were instructed to open and complete them on different computers and to delete the files once the researcher sent them confirmation of receipt. They were informed that their participation was confidential, that the transcripts of the interviews might be used in scholarly publications and that excerpts from the audiotapes may be used in classrooms or scholarly presentations. They were also reminded that they could stop the interview or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

After the couples had signed the hard copy or electronic version of the research materials and returned them, the interview was scheduled and conducted either face-to-face or via telephone. Couples who lived in the Denver Metro area ( $n = 10$ ) were interviewed face-to-face. These interviews took place in the couple's homes ( $n = 2$ ), in their workplaces ( $n = 2$ ), in a public location ( $n = 2$ ) and at the University of Denver ( $n = 4$ ). The remaining couples ( $n = 22$ ), who were geographically located all over the United States, were asked to be in the same room on the same phone line on different extensions

for the interview. This proved challenging in only a few cases ( $n = 3$ ) where the couple did not have a cordless phone or only had cellular service. In those cases, three-way calling or speaker phones were utilized.

The interviews were audiotaped and lasted an average of 68 minutes, with a range of 35 to 134 minutes. Upon completion of the interview, each couple was offered a twenty dollar gift card for their contribution to the study. The gift cards were sent via email, and the participants received from the researcher an email notification that the gift card had been ordered. The participants were also offered a summary of the research results upon the study's completion.

### *Interviews*

The primary purpose of the interview portion of the study was to elicit stepfamily couple's narratives about their shared parenting experiences. According to Polkinghorne (1988), "Narratives are a recurrent and prominent feature of accounts offered in all types of interviews. If respondents are allowed to continue in their own way until they indicate that they have completed their answers, they are likely to relate stories" (p. 163). As recommended by Mishler (1986), these in-depth interviews utilized unrestricted questions, along with minimal interruptions and encouragement to elaborate. Thus, in addition to a few questions which had a limited set of responses, the majority of the interview questions were rather general, and open-ended. Grounded theory researchers must frame questions so that they are "sufficiently general to cover a wide range of experiences as well as narrow enough to elicit and explore the participant's specific experience" (Charmaz, 2002, p. 679). The open-ended and unrestricted questions helped generate the narratives needed for systematic analysis.

The approach taken by the researcher when conducting the interviews was that of the "active interviewer" (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). Rather than conducting the interviews as structured, information-producing events, the interviews were approached as social encounters with a mission. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) provide a carefully considered description of this process:

The active interviewer is responsible for inciting respondents' answers. But the active interviewer does far more than dispassionate questioning; he or she *activates narrative production* [emphasis in original]. Where the standardized approach attempts to strip the interview of all but the most neutral, impersonal stimuli, the consciously active interviewer intentionally, concertedly provokes responses by indicating—even suggesting—narrative positions, resources, orientations, and precedents for the respondent to engage in addressing the research questions under consideration. (p. 39)

Holstein and Gubrium's (2003) conceptualization of the active interview involves the interviewer conversing with the respondent in such a way that the process invites consideration of alternate views, linkages between diverse experiences and interpretation of connections and outlooks. It is a wholly dynamic process on the part of the interviewer who uses interactional and discursive practices to provoke responses in the *interview conversation*.

As stated earlier, both telephone and in-person interviewing was used to activate narrative production. Telephone interviews are considered to be advantageous with regard to cost, controlling situational variables, quantification of results, and completion time, whereas in-person interviews are considered to have the advantages of naturalness, increased responses rates, thoughtfulness of responses, tackling complex issues, accessing marginalized respondents, and addressing sensitive questions (Shuy, 2002). However, the appropriateness of the interview mode should be determined based on the

specific research purpose. "Some kinds of information may be gathered from respondents just as well by means of telephone as in-person" (Shuy, 2002, p. 538). Shuy (2002) lists several criteria for making a determination of the appropriateness of telephone or in-person interviewing. These criteria include the type of interview to be carried out, variability of interviewers and participants, the need for contextual naturalness, the need for responses that are not influenced by the questions, the need for uniformity among multiple interviewers, type of information sought, complexity of issues, and location constraints.

For the purposes of this research the decision to conduct telephone or in-person interviews was determined by location constraints of the project. The couples who were residing locally were interviewed in-person [ $n = 10$ ] and the couples who were geographically distant were interviewed via telephone [ $n = 22$ ]. However, in considering the criteria for choosing one mode over the other, for the research purpose of collecting and analyzing narratives, the advantages of one were not significant over the other. There was only one interviewer on this project, so the attitudinal variability of interviewers, as well as the need for consistency among multiple interviewers, were not issues for consideration. Interviewer effects were thus expected to be the same for both modes. Similarly, the audiotaped interviewer-respondent context for the narrative constructions was not considered to be significantly different whether these interviews were via telephone or in-person. One setting is no more "natural" than the other. Certainly neither context is conducive to "natural conversation" as being interviewed is comparatively quite uncommon and thus seemingly unnatural. [A further discussion of naturally occurring talk in interview settings appears later in this section]. In addition, the

questions and issues being asked about were not particularly complex as they dealt with the participants own personal experiences. Certainly some couples could have considered the questions to be somewhat personal or sensitive in nature. Presumably in-person interviews are favored for such topics. However, Shuy (2002) notes that research on the prevalence of socially desirable responses to sensitive questions in telephone versus in-person interviews has yielded conflicting findings, where differences are seen mainly in highly sensitive issues (e.g., illegal activities).

Without question, in-person interviews contain more non-verbal interaction cues than do telephone interviews. Among other measures, this can contribute to comfort with self-disclosure. "[F]ace-to-face interaction compels more small talk, politeness routines, joking, non-verbal communication, and asides in which people can more fully express their humanity. And naturalness leads to open expression and comfort" (Shuy, 2002, p. 541). Still, telephone interviews do allow for non-verbal paralinguistic cues to be interpreted. The interviewer can give the respondent feedback through tone, volume, pitch, inflection, murmurs, and gasps. And, interviewers can also make efforts to put the respondent at ease through small talk, joking, and politeness routines over the telephone. Though both telephone and in-person interviews were utilized in this research project, all effort was made to ensure that the couples who were interviewed over the telephone had as similar an experience as possible to the couples who were interviewed face-to-face. In an effort to ensure quality responses in both modes, the contextual and interactional differences due to the differing modes were minimized as much as possible or compensated for by the researcher through interactional efforts. Both modes were approached as social encounters by an active interviewer.

The interview question protocol followed that described by Johnson (2002) where icebreaker questions lead into purposeful questions, followed by concluding questions which provide an opportunity for the interviewer to summarize the key points and/or present information provided by other participants [see Appendix D]. The initial warm-up questions asked the participants to discuss their experiences with forming their family. These included questions related to how they met, when they got married, and what they talked about when deciding to merge homes and families. These questions served the purpose of easing the couple into the interview process as well as helping them to place their stepfamily experiences in the forefront of their minds.

In the remaining focused interview questions, the stepcouples were asked to recount critical incidents about sharing parenting across households, incidents they have related to others in the past (e.g., "Tell me about some of the significant experiences that you [two] have had with the co-raising parent(s) regarding co-raising the children, particularly those experiences that you have shared with a few other people"), as well as their impressions of the coparenting relationship with these other adults (e.g., "Tell me about your relationship(s) with the other adults co-raising the children"), how satisfied they were with this communication ("On a scale of 1-10 how satisfied are you with interactions you have with him/her/them? Why?") and what they may like to see change in the coparenting communication ("What would you like to see change about the interactions/encounters you have with him/her/them? What would you like the interactions to be like?"). Finally, the closing questions provided the participants with the opportunity to give some summary thoughts and impart to others advice related to their cross-household shared parenting communication and stepfamily life in general.

The stepcouple interviews were audiotaped by the interviewer with the participants' consent. Audiotaping of the interviews was necessary to acquire accurate transcriptions, and without transcriptions the characteristics of spoken discourse could not be brought into focus and analyzed systematically (Cameron, 2001). However, audiotaping can influence the talk being recorded. "[I]t is widely acknowledged that recording talk, whether in a laboratory setting or somewhere else, has the potential to affect participants' behavior and make the talk something different from what it would have been otherwise" (Cameron, 2001, p. 20). The mere presence of a researcher may affect the talk being examined. Labov (1972) refers to the dilemma of wanting to observe talk that occurs while not being observed as "the Observer's Paradox"—we cannot observe naturalistic talk because our observation renders it "unnatural."

However, if we take this narrow view of natural settings we are severely limited in our methods of collecting data, being obliged to record talk without participant's knowledge. This of course raises logistical issues with regard to surreptitious recording, and ethical issues with regard to informed consent and privacy. We are thus left with "unnatural" talk, and "bad" data (Cameron (2001). However, Cameron (2001) has challenged this limited view of "good" data claiming that all data is natural in certain contexts. For example, the distinctive talk observed in a tenure review meeting is in that context "natural." Similarly, the talk displayed in a researcher-participant interview is a "speech event" (Mishler, 1986; Schiffrin, 1994) in which the speech is natural in that context. Any social activity, even participating in a research project, is contextual. In such a case, and in this case, the observation and recording of the talk constitutes the context, and thus can be considered "natural" and "good" data.

## Measurements

### *Shared Parenting Communication*

Questions about the nature of the shared parenting communication were included in both the survey and interview questions, and thus the answers were given in writing and orally. These questions were designed to determine the quality, mode, and frequency of the shared parenting communication as well as how satisfied the couples were with it and how involved each spouse was in this process. Specifically, the couples were asked how often they communicated with the other adults, what the mode of communication was, who within the couple participated in the communication (parent, stepparent or both), and who the couple communicated with about shared parenting. They were also asked to indicate on a scale of one to ten how involved each was in parenting decisions, and how satisfied they each were with the interactions they had with the other adults. Additionally, they were asked whether or not they plan together how they communicate with the other adult(s) with whom they share parenting. The responses to many of these questions were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively, and are presented in the next chapter.

### *Stepcouple Shared Parenting Challenges*

Difficulties related to sharing parenting for stepcouples were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. The qualitative analysis of the narratives was discussed earlier in this chapter. The quantitative measure of challenges was conducted using an adaptation of the Questionnaire for Stepfamily Spouses (QSS) (Beaudry, Parent, Saint-Jacques, Guay & Boisvert, 2001). The 52-question instrument measures four areas of stepcouple difficulties: 1) social and family, 2) role of spouse, 3) role of the parent, and

4) role of the stepparent. The alpha coefficients of each scale are higher than .80 reflecting a high level of internal consistency (Beaudry et al., 2001).

The QSS instrument was adapted for this study to include those questions considered to be particularly relevant to joint-custody cross-household shared parenting experiences. For example, negotiating the stepparent roles, situations which would involve interacting with the former spouse, and managing the stepchildren were addressed in the questionnaire. Questions which might be relevant to stepfamily life but not so much to shared parenting were eliminated. Such questions were on the topics of dealing with prejudices for stepfamilies, sharing time together as a couple, and parenting together and separately.

Included in the modified instrument were eight questions related to the *social and family dimension of stepfamilies*, such as legal and financial challenges, stepparent legitimacy, participating in family events as a stepfamily, and functioning in society as a stepfamily. From the *role of spouse* and *role of stepparent* dimensions two questions each were retained, and from the *role of parent dimension* four questions were included. In addition, another question which was not included in the QSS Instrument and asks about the challenge of sharing decisions with other adults in the child's other home, was added to this instrument. What remained was a composite scale of seventeen questions, on shared parenting challenges for stepcouples, which are particularly salient to the subject of this inquiry.

#### *Marital Satisfaction*

Because stepcouples' experiences with coparenting across households may affect their marital quality, the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (LWMAT) (Locke &

Wallace, 1959) was used to measure the couples' satisfaction with marriage. The instrument is comprised of 15 items measuring marital satisfaction and agreement levels on various aspects of a couple's life. It is a Likert-type, self-report and fixed response design. The LWMAT instrument has yielded consistent reliability and validity for determining couples in distress (Gottman, Markman, and Notarius, 1977). The LWMAT is one of the mostly widely used instruments to measure marital satisfaction. Due to the comparatively rapid assessment quality and yet high correlations with both the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) and the Marital Satisfaction Inventory (Snyder, 1979) (Freeston & Plechaty, 1997), the LWMAT was the instrument best suited for this inquiry. The present study yielded a reliability coefficient of .78. A correlation between the LWMAT scores and both the narrative themes and shared parenting challenges variables were analyzed to identify relationships among them.

## Data Analysis

### *Narrative Theme Coding*

Using a systematic, grounded theory approach, the narratives were analyzed to identify themes in the stepcouples narratives about shared parenting across households. This analysis was informed by the social constructionist family systems theoretical framework. Sensitizing concepts and theoretical codes presented in the theoretical framework constitute the starting point for the grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Areas explored with this process included communication approaches, challenges and orientations to shared parenting. The specific techniques used involved a four-phase process. The first step was data transcription. The audiotapes of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, with broken sentences, interruptions and filled pauses, so as to

further ensure the accuracy of the interpretations of the narratives (see Poland, 2002). The entire 724 pages of transcripts were carefully read by the researcher, and were reviewed for accuracy. These efforts were made to ensure "the trustworthiness of the data and subsequent interpretations" (Poland, 2002, p. 645). The remaining phases follow that of Strauss and Corbin's (1990, 1998; see also LaRossa, 2005) systematic data analysis comprised of open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

*Open coding.* The next step in the coding process was open coding. Strauss and Corbin (1998) see open coding as a discovery of concepts which can be examined and hypothesized about in order to determine how phenomena might be related. These phenomena identified as concepts are compared and contrasted in a search for connections.

Broadly speaking, during open coding, data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences. Events, happenings, objects and actions/interactions that are found to be conceptually similar in nature or related in meaning are grouped under more abstract concepts termed "categories." (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 102)

The act of naming or labeling a phenomenon allows the concept (i.e., the labeled phenomenon) to be categorized. Categorization involves grouping seemingly dissimilar, yet related concepts, into more abstract classifications (Strauss, 1987; LaRossa, 2005). Categories are identified through analysis of the transcript line-by-line, sentence or paragraph, or entire document (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Often a macroanalytic look at the entire narratives led to the need for a more detailed analysis for proper categorization of concepts and vice versa. For example, initial themes that emerged in this research at the macroanalytic level were negativity and positivity. These themes were identified by looking at specific lines of the text, discrete stories within the interview, as well as the

entire interview narrative. Such systematic comparisons require rigorous in-depth analysis and can lead to identification of errors and subsequent reclassification of concepts, thus reducing the potential for researcher bias (Corbin and Strauss, 1990).

*Axial coding.* The second phase of the narrative coding involved relating the categories to their subcategories, a process referred to as axial coding (see Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Axial coding is intense analysis conducted over one category at a time, "forming an 'axis' around which further coding and category building is done" (Kelle, 2007, p. 201). This level of coding focuses on the social processes associated with a category. Although subcategories are considered categories as well, they do not represent the phenomenon so much as they answer questions such as "when, where, why, who, how and with what consequences, thus giving the concept greater explanatory power" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Axial coding allows the researcher to identify more specific linkages between concepts within categories. An example of axial coding in this research would be the category of experiencing disregard when sharing parenting, where further analysis reveals in what areas disregard is communicated and how it is communicated. Such an analysis enables the researcher to form hypotheses about the relationships among concepts and categories, the various variables which have been discovered (LaRossa, 2005). A coding form was developed to aid in the open and axial coding processes [See appendix E].

*Selective coding.* The final phase of the narrative coding procedure was selective coding, which entails identifying a core variable, the one variable that is fundamentally germane (Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987; LaRossa, 2005). The core variable or category is the overarching theme of the coded data. The core variable "has analytic power...to pull

the other categories together to form an explanatory whole" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 146). LaRossa (2005) refers to this core category or variable as "the main story underlying the analysis" (p. 850). The central variable of the stepcouples' narratives which were discovered in this coding process as well as the categories comprising it will be discussed further in the remaining chapters.

### Mixed Methods Data Collection and Analysis

Although mixed methods in social research provide results which allow for more accurate inferences (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003), they are inherently more complex than monomethod approaches (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Compounding the complex nature of the research design in this study is the complex nature of the population being studied. The participants were quite diverse in the levels of involvedness in their shared parenting interactions. Some stepcouples in the study shared parenting with only one other bioparent. Other stepcouples shared parenting with a bioparent and a stepparent. There was also a group who shared parenting with two different households because both partners had children from previous relationships. Some of these particular stepcouples might share parenting with four other adults who are co-raising children. Such diversity can complicate the scoring for such measures as interactions satisfaction or challenges in shared parenting. Also, while exploratory qualitative analysis benefits from open-ended information gathering, such as collecting all shared parenting experiences for each type of diverse stepcouple, without prudent parameters it can make a rigorous quantitative analysis unfeasible when quantifying qualitative findings for comparison to quantitative variables.

Consequently, in order to achieve the advantages of using both qualitative methods and the quantitative methods in this mixed methods design, strict procedures were put into place to honor the assumptions of both approaches. When conducting mixed methods research, it is vital to adhere to the assumptions of the method and the components of data collection and analysis (Morse, 2003). That is, because this study used the data transformation model (see Creswell, Fetters, & Ivankova, 2004; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007), where qualitative data was analyzed and then transformed by quantifying it, parameters were put in place to ensure that the quantitative analyses included transformed variables which were comparable. For example, although narratives were collected from both households with which a stepcouple shared parenting, these narratives from the second household were only used for exploratory inquiry to identify themes not used for creating any variables which were to be compared in quantitative analyses. Only those narratives from the predetermined household were used to quantify the qualitative data. Also, when asked to complete the challenges questionnaire, those couples who shared parenting with more than one household were instructed to respond to the questions with only the predetermined side in mind. Only the interaction satisfaction and decision-making scores from the predetermined household were used in quantitative analyses. With these parameters in place, the transformed narrative theme variables, challenges scores and marital satisfaction scores were comparable for all participants.

This chapter provided details about the methods used in the study. The recruitment procedures of the purposive sample of participants were discussed. Also the procedures used to collect the survey questionnaire and interview data was described.

The coding scheme for the narrative analysis was presented in detail. Principally, the grounded theory procedures of Straus and Corbin (1998) were applied at the microanalytic level. After transcription was completed, open, axial and selective coding procedures were applied to systematically analyze the stepcouples' narratives. Combining the quantitative, survey data with the qualitative, narrative data constitutes methodological and data triangulation in this mixed methods design study. The next chapter presents the results of these analyses.

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

This chapter provides a summary of the results of the present study. First, the conditions and characteristics of the stepcouples' shared parenting communication within and across households are identified (RQ1). Second, the thematic analyses of the narratives about shared parenting communication are presented (RQ2). Third, the challenges that stepcouples experience with shared parenting communication are identified (RQ3). Finally, the relationship between the narrative themes, shared parenting challenges and marital satisfaction are determined (RQ4).

While mixed methods research is challenging to conduct, so, too, is it challenging to evaluate and present (Greene, 2007, Sandelowski, 2003, Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Considering that the methods represent traditions which use different voices (Greene, 2007), it is important to use a voice and structure which best present the findings of the research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). In order to aid the reading of the results, a third person voice is used throughout the study, as it seems to lend to more flexibility when presenting both traditions than does a first-person voice. As well, the results are presented as answers to each research question. Because this is a mixed methods design, some research questions will be answered and presented as qualitative results and others as quantitative. The first research question will be presented as both

qualitative and quantitative because both methods were used to develop the answer. The shifts between methods will be indicated in the headings within each finding.

### Shared Parenting Communication: Research Question One

Research question one sought to illuminate the conditions and characteristics of shared parenting communication for stepcouples both within and across households. The qualities of the shared parenting communication explored included the frequency and method of this communication, the identification of the parents involved in the communication including the stepparent's role, as well as the stepcouple's reported quality of the shared communication and their satisfaction with these interactions.

#### *Shared Parenting Communication Characteristics – Quantitative*

The cross-household communication occurs via telephone, email, messages sent through the children, face-to-face, and a combination of these methods. In this sample 16% ( $n = 5$ ) of the stepcouples communicate mainly through telephone conversations, 9% ( $n = 3$ ) communicate face-to-face, 3% ( $n = 1$ ) use email as the main method of communicating and 72% ( $n = 23$ ) use a combination of methods to communicate across households. A majority, 60%, of the stepcouples' communication occurs solely with the non-residential biological parent ( $n = 21$ ), 22% occurs with both the non-residential biological parent and stepparent ( $n = 7$ ), 9% occurs with both the non-residential biological parent and another family member, such as a grandmother or aunt ( $n = 3$ ), and 3% occurs primarily with a grandmother ( $n = 1$ ). Between the two parenting partners, the stepcouples in this study communicate across households an average of eleven times per month ( $SD = 1.89$ ) with a range of 1 to 28.

*Stepparent Involvement in Shared Parenting Communication – Quantitative*

Stepcouples presented with a range of individual versus joint parent involvement in the shared parenting communication. In this sample, 41% ( $n = 13$ ) of the couples reported that both the stepparents and the biological parents are directly involved in shared parenting communication. Of the stepmother-biofather couples in the study, 42% ( $n = 5$ ) are jointly involved in shared parenting communication. Of the stepfather-biomother couples, 41% ( $n = 8$ ) are jointly involved in shared parenting communication. As mentioned above, these stepcouples (residential biological parent and stepparent) also communicate with both the non-residential bioparent and stepparent in 22% of the cases. Table 1 summarizes the frequency of direct shared parenting communication across households.

Table 1

*Shared Parenting Communication – Direct*

| Type                            | Frequency | Percent |
|---------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Stepcouple Communicators        |           |         |
| Bioparent Exclusively           | 19        | 59.4    |
| Biomother                       | (12)      | (37.5)  |
| Biofather                       | (7)       | (21.9)  |
| Bioparent and Stepparent        | 13        | 40.6    |
| Biofather and Stepmother        | (5)       | (15.6)  |
| Biomother and Stepfather        | (8)       | (25.0)  |
| Stepcouple Communicatees        |           |         |
| Bioparent Exclusively           | 21        | 65.6    |
| Biomother                       | (10)      | (31.3)  |
| Biofather                       | (11)      | (34.4)  |
| Bioparent and Stepparent        | 7         | 21.9    |
| Biofather and Stepmother        | (6)       | (18.8)  |
| Biomother and Stepfather        | (1)       | (3.1)   |
| Bioparent and/or Other Relative | 4         | 12.5    |

Note: Seventeen of the 1 biological parent communicatees are not remarried and so there is no stepparent in the other household. Parentheses indicate the breakdown of the frequency and percent by parent role within each category.  $N = 64$ .

Within the thirteen joint-involvement stepcouples, the stepparents communicate an average of 4 times per month ( $SD = 2.91$ ), with a range of 1 to 10, directly with the adult(s) in the children's other household. The frequency of communication for one stepfather was eliminated in calculating the stepfather communication frequencies ( $M = 2.07$ ,  $SD = .84$ ) due to extremely unusual living and working arrangements for which he reported communicating 28 times per month with the parent in the children's other home. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the frequency of direct shared parenting communication for stepmothers and stepfathers. The test indicated that stepmothers ( $M = 7.00$ ,  $SD = 2.12$ ) participate in direct shared parenting communication significantly more frequently than stepfathers ( $M = 2.07$ ,  $SD = .78$ ),  $t(11) = 4.99$ ,  $p = .005$ .

#### *Stepparent Involvement in Shared Parenting Communication – Qualitative*

The stepcouples in this study differ in the way they approach parental involvement or inclusion in shared parenting communication. Not all communication enacted by an individual parent is an individual effort. That is, communication that takes place across households is sometimes the result of a communication strategy co-constructed by the stepcouple parenting partners. In fact, 75% ( $n = 24$ ) of the stepcouples report co-constructing to some degree shared parenting communication across households. In such cases, one of the parenting partners, usually the bioparent, does the direct communication of the jointly-constructed message. In other cases, the communication effort and enactment is accomplished individually, but not necessarily by the bioparent.

In looking at the experiences they have had with planning together, or not, how they are going to communicate with the non-residential parent(s), the stepcouples displayed four approaches to shared parenting communication. These methods stepcouples employ to engage in shared parenting communication across households include 1) coactive, 2) conferred (synchronous and asynchronous), 3) consultative, and 4) non-consultative. Often couples engage in more than one type of stepcouple shared parenting communication.

### *Coactive*

The first of the four shared parenting communication methods stepcouples utilize is the *coactive* method. Each parent partner is actively involved and relatively autonomous when communicating messages across households. In coactive shared parenting communication both the bioparent partner and the stepparent partner share equal license to initiate and receive communication across households. Both are recognized as legitimate agents by the shared parenting participant(s) (SPP) in the other household. The individual parent partner makes the decision to communicate and has the authority to do so as a representative of the stepcouple or stepfamily. In such cases the other parent partner may be informed of the results of the communication after it has taken place.

Paul, a biofather of two teenage girls who spend fifty percent of their time in each home, explains that often when he realizes something needs to be discussed with the biomother, the stepmother has already initiated the communication on the topic:

I'll say 'Oh, we need to talk to her about this' and she'll say 'Oh, we already talked about that.' So, I mean it's... pretty open. If something comes up... we don't necessarily have to plan. When I get brought in they've already [discussed

it]...yeah we don't have to think of a presentation or delivery or anything like that. It's open. She says that they have this going on and it's like 'Oh, okay.'

Lisa is the biological parent of a two boys, aged 15 and 8, and the stepparent of Jim's two girls aged 4 and 8. She describes the kind of situation which led her to be more involved in directly communicating with Jim's girls' biological mother. The non-residential biological mother had been putting up resistance to Jim's girls visiting him since he had moved from their small town to a big city two hours away. The biological mother had suddenly decided not to let the girls go on the first visitation weekend because they had plans with their paternal grandmother who lives in the girls' town:

And that was kind of the weekend I started involving myself in the conversations, because Jim was on the phone going "Oh, wait a minute, hold on a second, what are you talking about" and you could tell he was just getting more frustrated. So, I said, "Just give me the damn phone." And okay, let's stop for a second and step back and see what the real issue is. The real issue is Jim has to spend time with his kids and Nancy has all the time in the world because she lives in Bakersville. And I just had her commit to dates. Okay, we will see you at this time on that day when we pick up the kids.

Lisa continues to communicate regularly with her stepdaughters' biological mother to coordinate activities, scheduling, and events with the children. Each of these cases illustrates coactive shared parenting communication, where both the bioparent and the stepparent actively communicate directly across households.

Coactive communication is not just limited to schedule and activity maintenance of the shared children. Carrie, a stepmother to her 8-year-old stepdaughter, discusses child-raising issues with the biological mother of her stepdaughter:

She and I can talk on the phone for an hour very easily and everything is perfectly fine. I will call her to get advice on certain things. She will call me to give me a heads up, as to what is going on with Elizabeth. If Elizabeth had a fight with one of her friends, or if something went wrong at school, or if she has told a lie and is

being punished or something at her mom's house, [her mother] will call to let me know she is in trouble.

The above narrative demonstrates that coercive communication can involve everyday maintenance as well as more significant parenting issues and concerns about raising children. These can take the form of one-on-one residential stepparent and biological parent conversations. But sometimes they involve parent conferences where more than the two biological parents gather to discuss shared parenting concerns. The key characteristics of coercive communication are recognition of all parents involved as legitimate actors in the shared parenting issue.

### *Conferred*

The second type of shared parenting communication that stepcouples utilize is the *conferred* method. In conferred shared parenting communication, the stepcouple parent partners come together to discuss how they will communicate about a particular shared parenting issue with the shared parenting participant(s) (SPP). They may discuss and decide what to say, as well as how to say it, in order to get the desired outcome from the interaction. The bioparent partner is then the stepcouple spokesperson for the agreed upon communication with the SPP.

For example, Todd, a stepfather to his 17-year-old stepdaughter who resides in each home fifty percent of the time, finds that he and his wife need to discuss how to clarify their financial agreement with his stepdaughter's biological father. Although their agreement is to split expenses equally between the two homes, often the stepcouple will pay more than their share only to find the biological father asks for reimbursement for his expenses:

We actually just sometimes pay a lot of things, and yet he'll come up sometimes and say "Okay, I need you to pay me for X," and we have to remind him of things we have paid without splitting it. So, we talk about the best way to tell him that ... and make sure it's clear and concise so that we don't end up getting into an argument with him. So we talk about how to deal with that with him...and then Laurie usually communicates [that to him].

Another example of conferred communication occurs when attempting to schedule time with the child. Carrie's 8-year-old stepdaughter lives in another state, and so the every other weekend schedule during the school year is suspended for the summer. She and her husband Bob need to negotiate with the biological mother (Louise) which days they will have the child for the next three months:

With regard to the summer visitation schedule, what we do is, I usually look at the schedule. I figure out the days that work for us. I propose it to Bob and I breakdown how many days we had her last summer, how many days we want her this summer, why this works, and give him kind of the bullet points of what our arguments are for why we need her these days and he will convey them to Louise.

Conferred communication occurs *asynchronously* as in the examples above, and *synchronously*. Asynchronous conferred communication occurs when the stepcouple agrees upon the communication prior to the bioparent-SPP interaction. The bioparent partner then, at a later time, communicates directly with the SPP. Synchronous conferred communication occurs when, in real time, the stepparent partner is communicating with the bioparent partner about what message to send, while the bioparent partner is simultaneously communicating with the SPP. For example, the bioparent partner is on the phone with the SPP, and the stepparent partner is in the room telling him or her, what it is that needs to be communicated. Carrie, from the above example explains how synchronous conferred communication may be utilized: "Sometimes, we will go so far as

he will be on the phone with her and will be emailing me saying she's proposing this, what do we think about this, does this work for us, and I will be responding."

### *Consultative*

While conferred shared parenting communication involves a jointly constructed plan that is carried out by one parent partner, either synchronously or asynchronously, consultative shared parenting communication messages may or may not be enacted. The bioparent partner consults with the stepparent partner, or the stepparent partner volunteers suggestions for how to communicate with the SPP(s). In such cases the stepparent partner acts as coach or consultant for the bioparent partner, who may or may not follow the communication advice offered. This type of stepcouple shared parenting communication differs from the conferred type in that there is not a joint decision about a plan for communicating the intended message. In consultative shared parenting communication it is rather the bioparent's decision about whether or not to approach the cross household communication as advised.

Lenore, is a stepmother to her husband's four children with ages ranging from 11 to 23. She often coaches her husband, Mike, on how best to handle communication with the children's biological mother, but ultimately it is his decision whether or not he takes her advice:

What I've done is, I've written something down and then I've showed it to Mike and I've said, "you can send this if you want to" and a lot of times he kind of maybe changes it because he knows that she's very reactive and he knows her personality and what she would do if she were to receive something maybe the way I originally wrote it.

Similarly, Tyler, who is the stepfather to his wife's three children with ages ranging from 13 to 18, sometimes consults with his wife before she communicates with

his stepdaughter's biological father. Ultimately though, his wife composes and delivers the message individually.

We discuss it mainly you know what it is they need to talk about, and that kind of thing, but because she has known him a lot longer, she, verbally she can express herself a lot better than I can. Most normally she mainly ends up doing most of the writing, and I say that because a lot of their interaction is with email.

In Tyler and Lenore's cases, they are stepparents who provide an ear and also advice for the biological parent partner. But unlike conferred communication, where there is joint composition of the message, these consultative messages in their final format are composed and communicated solely by the biological parent partner.

#### *Non-consultative*

The final type of shared parenting communication identified as used by these couples is termed non-consultative. In non-consultative communication, the biological parent partner acts alone in communication with the SPPs. The stepparent partner is not a resource to be consulted with when planning communication across households. He or she does not participate in conferred communication by actively composing the content and delivery of the message, and does not initiate or receive communication directly with the SPP. For example, when asked about who communicates across households, a biological parent stated, "I usually just take care of it on my own." Other biological parents and stepparents might include something in their statement which suggests that they participate as partners and parents in other ways. For example, Jim is a stepfather of Lisa's two boys aged 15 and 8. He explains how Lisa is the sole communicator when it comes to sharing parenting across households. "She usually does her thing and if she needs support, I give it to her. But usually she has a better idea of how to handle him and

what to say...Usually [the support I give her] is after the fact." In this case, while Jim is supportive for the outcome of the communication across households, he does not actually participate in it as consultant, collaborator, or active agent.

Trista, a biomother of a 12-year-old girl, explains that she also uses her husband, Roy, for parenting support and input, but when it comes to shared parenting communication content and delivery, she does not utilize him as a resource.

I would say that you know I try to rely on Roy's input. He's certainly raised four children, farther along than I have. So I try to respect his input or what I think he wants. But as far as how to talk to Dan or whatever, we might decide we're going to go away for the weekend, then I talk to Dan. I don't discuss how I'm going to do that with Roy.

In these two cases, the biological parents do not include the stepparents in the shared parenting communication. It is something that they handle individually, without consultation on the decision about what and how to communicate across households.

A summary of the stepcouple shared parenting communication descriptive typology is presented in Table 2. In addition, a classification of the communication patterns practiced within these types is presented in Table 3.

Table 2

*Stepcouple Shared Parenting Communication: A Typology*

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| Type                    | Description  |
|-------------------------|--|
| <i>Coactive</i>         | Both parents take an active, direct role in communication across Households (HH). The SPP and the bioparent recognize the stepparent as a representative of the stepcouple and accept his or her role as a shared parenting communicator. The message is individually composed and independently or jointly delivered by either the stepparent or the bioparent partner. |
| <i>Conferred</i>        | Both parents take an active role in formulating the message. However, only one parent is delegated to communicate across households. Often the stepparent partner is indirectly involved, and the biological parent is the spokesperson for the synchronously or asynchronously conferred communication. The message is jointly composed and individually delivered.     |
| <i>Consultative</i>     | The stepparent acts as coach or consultant for the stepparent who may or may not follow his or her advice. The biological parent partner makes the final decision about the composition and delivery of the message. The message is individually composed and delivered.   |
| <i>Non-consultative</i> | The bioparent partner acts alone in the communication without consulting the stepparent partner. The message is individually composed and delivered by the bioparent partner. The stepparent partner is not directly or indirectly involved in the shared parenting communication.   |

Note: These approaches to shared parenting communication were gleaned from several shared parenting communication examples the stepcouples provided in the narratives. Frequencies for each type cannot be established as several couples gave multiple examples which several types.

Table 3

*Classification of Shared Parenting Communication Approaches*

| Type                    | Agency                                     | Composition | Delivery                | Summary   |
|-------------------------|--|-------------|-------------------------|---|
| <i>Coactive</i>         | Equal within and across HH                 | Individual  | Independent or Joint    | Equal agency within and across households; individually composed message; independent or joint delivery       |
| <i>Conferred</i>        | Equal within HH                            | Joint       | Independent (delegated) | Equal agency within household; jointly composed message; delivery delegated to one parent                     |
| <i>Consultative</i>     | Bioparent-dominant within HH               | Individual  | Independent             | Bioparent-dominant agency within households; individually composed message, independent delivery              |
| <i>Non-consultative</i> | Bioparent exclusively within and across HH | Individual  | Independent             | Bioparent is exclusive agent within and across households; individually composed message, individual delivery |

Note: HH = households.

### *Shared Parenting Interaction Satisfaction – Quantitative*

The participants indicated in a Likert-type scale from 1 to 10 how satisfied they were with their shared parenting interactions. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data by parent type. The mean interactional satisfaction score for biomothers was 5.95 ( $SD = 2.86$ ). Stepmothers had a mean satisfaction score of 6.0 ( $SD = 3.64$ ). Stepfathers' mean interaction satisfaction score was 5.90 ( $SD = 3.51$ ). Biofathers had a mean satisfaction score of 5.92 ( $SD = 3.12$ ). An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the shared parenting interaction satisfaction for stepmother-biofather couples and stepfather-biomother couples. The test indicated that stepmother-biofather couples ( $M = 6.00, SD = 2.97$ ) did not differ significantly in shared parenting interaction satisfaction compared to stepfather-biomother couples ( $M = 5.97, SD = 3.01$ ),  $t(30) = .046, p > .05$ .

### *Shared Parenting Interaction Qualities – Qualitative*

The stepcouples interactions across households ranged from hostile and antagonistic to friendly and intimate. These interactions were categorized based on the description the stepcouples gave for them in terms of perceived quality. The three major categories for interaction quality that emerged in the stepcouples descriptions were *deficient*, *adequate*, and *gratifying*. The category with the highest frequency was *adequate*, where 43.8 percent ( $n = 14$ ) of the couples described the interactions in this way. Descriptors used for adequate interactions included indicators of quality, such as "neutral," "business-like," "okay," "detached," and "functional," as well as intensity of the interactions, where indicators included "minimal," "as needed," "to-the-point," "just the facts," and "limited." For example one stepfather described the shared parenting across

households as "a healthy form of doldrums, the way it should be. There's not inappropriate attention paid to it. There's the right kind of function and practicality to it."

The second category of stepcouple interactions across households is *deficient*, and 31.3% ( $n = 10$ ) of the couples described their interactions in this manner. Stepcouples who indicated that their interactions across households were deficient mainly focused on the quality of the interactions when describing them. Deficient interactions were described in such ways as "hostile," "abrasive," "horrible," "not good," "adversarial," and "absolutely terrible." For example a stepmother describes her shared parenting experience as: "I think it is the ugliest relationship I've ever had in my life with anybody. I mean, I guess because it's ongoing and ... things get, you know, bitter or nasty, and sometimes I think 'when is this ever going to end?'" Her husband says the following of their experience: "There's a lot of ... bitterness there... I mean, on both sides. I can't really think of anybody else in this world that I dislike more."

The third category of interactions across households is *gratifying*, with 25% ( $n = 8$ ) of the couples describing their shared parenting interactions in this way. Stepcouples whose interactional descriptors placed them in the gratifying category, also focused mainly on the quality of the interactions when describing them. They used terms such as "great," "good," "excellent," "amicable," "intimate," "friendly," and "close." For example, a stepmother describes her and her husband's friendly interactions with the SPP, the biological mother of her stepdaughter who lives out of state:

It's very friendly. She's met my whole family and we know her whole family. It's fine. She is the type of person that if we lived in the same city, we would, in a different situation, we probably would be friends with her. We would hang out with her. She is a very nice person.

This stepmother's husband confirms this characterization of the relational interaction by adding "I wouldn't call it a relationship that is not intimate. It is. We know each other well."

A one-way ANOVA was used to test the relationship between the described quality of the interaction across households presented as a typology of *adequate*, *gratifying*, and *deficient*, and the interaction satisfaction scores. To calculate shared parenting interaction satisfaction for couples, the couples' scores were totaled and averaged. Interactions satisfaction differed significantly across the three types,  $F(2,29) = 11.91, p = .000$ . Scheffe post hoc comparisons of the three types indicate that stepcouples whose descriptors indicated their interactions were *deficient* ( $M = 3.25, SD = 2.62$ ), were significantly less satisfied than stepcouples whose descriptors indicated they were *adequate* ( $M = 6.21, SD = 2.40$ ),  $p = .005$ . Also, stepcouples who descriptors indicated they were deficient were significantly less satisfied with the interactions than stepcouples whose descriptors indicated the interactions were *gratifying* ( $M = 8.25, SD = 1.25$ ),  $p = .000$ . A comparison of the adequate and gratifying ( $M = 8.25, SD = 1.25$ ) types was not statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

#### *Changes Desired in Interactions across Households – Qualitative*

In addition to categories identifying the quality of the interactions being experienced, five types of desired changes emerged for stepcouples in their interactions across households. The changes in interaction desired included 1) qualitative improvement, 2) nothing, 3) more cooperation, 4) to cease, and 5) more information sharing. Some couples listed more than one type of change desired, and so the changes desired were not considered to be mutually exclusive.

The most frequently indicated change desired was the quality of the interactions ( $n = 12$ ) at 37.5 percent. These stepcouples said that they would like their interactions to be more "cordial," "neutral," "civil," "businesslike," "open," or "friendly," for example. Thirty-one percent ( $n = 10$ ) indicated that they would like nothing to change. More cooperation was listed as the third most common change desired ( $n = 7$ ), at 21.9 percent. These couples indicated that they would like to have more "give and take," "to have "two-way conversations," and be able to "see eye-to-eye." One stepmother who indicated that more cooperative communication was desirable said that she would like "be able to talk directly, without using lawyers." The fourth most common change in shared parenting interactions desired was their cessation ( $n = 4$ ) with 12.5 percent. For example, one biological mother of her 17-year-old daughter who spends fifty percent of her time in each bioparent's home said this of her desired change in the interactions across households:

I'd like them to be done. It will be as soon as she gets through college, other than weddings and stuff. Seriously, I mean, I would be perfectly happy if, when they're completely at, whenever I never have to interact again...honestly. I'd like it to cease altogether. That'd be perfect.

The fifth change desired in the shared parenting across households was an increase in the amount of information shared ( $n = 3$ ), with a mean of 9.4 percent. Stepcouples indicated that they would like "more information" or "more details" about what is happening with the children while they are in the other home. One stepfather explains the reason for this desired change:

You know, there's no specifics, no details, [about] what goes on over there or anything. You know, just real – just real general in everything. I would say that would be the biggest, you know, draw back to it, is not knowing exactly, you know, what's going on over there, you know, how her weekend was ...

This stepfather would like the communication to include more details so he has information about how his stepdaughter is spending her time when she's not in the home. Table 4 provides a summary of the frequency of the types of changes desired.

Table 4

*Desired Changes in Shared Parenting Communication*

| Change Desired                | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| <i>Better / Improved Tone</i> | 12        | 37.5    |
| <i>None</i>                   | 10        | 31.3    |
| <i>More Cooperation</i>       | 7         | 21.9    |
| <i>Cessation</i>              | 4         | 12.5    |
| <i>More Information</i>       | 5         | 9.4     |

Note: Themes are listed in descending order according to frequency. Percentages were tabulated by dividing the number of stepcouples who listed the theme by the number of stepcouples included in the study ( $N = 32$ ). Total percent does not equal 100 because some stepcouples indicated more than one theme. Themes are not considered mutually exclusive.

In sum, several characteristics of shared parenting communication were identified. In particular, stepparents are involved both directly and indirectly in shared parenting communication. There are multiple ways in which the stepparents are involved indirectly and these approaches are identified as conferred and consultative. Also, the manner in which the stepcouples describe their shared parenting interactions is related to their satisfaction with them. The next section presents the results of the narrative analyses.

## Narrative Themes: Research Question Two

Analysis of the narratives uncovered three major thematic areas concerning shared parenting for stepcouples. The first thematic area involves narratives about significant experiences the stepcouples have had when sharing parenting across households. These narratives, at the broadest level, involved significant experiences around positivity and negativity. The second thematic area identified in the narratives is stories about catalysts of change in the shared parenting communication and the relationship. Often the significant experiences led to either positive or negative changes in the shared parenting. The third major thematic area identified in the narrative data is a typology of the stepcouple co-constructed shared parenting. Analysis of the interviews as a whole, which included experiences, adjectives, and expressed attitudes, for example, revealed themes about the meaning of shared parenting for the stepcouples.

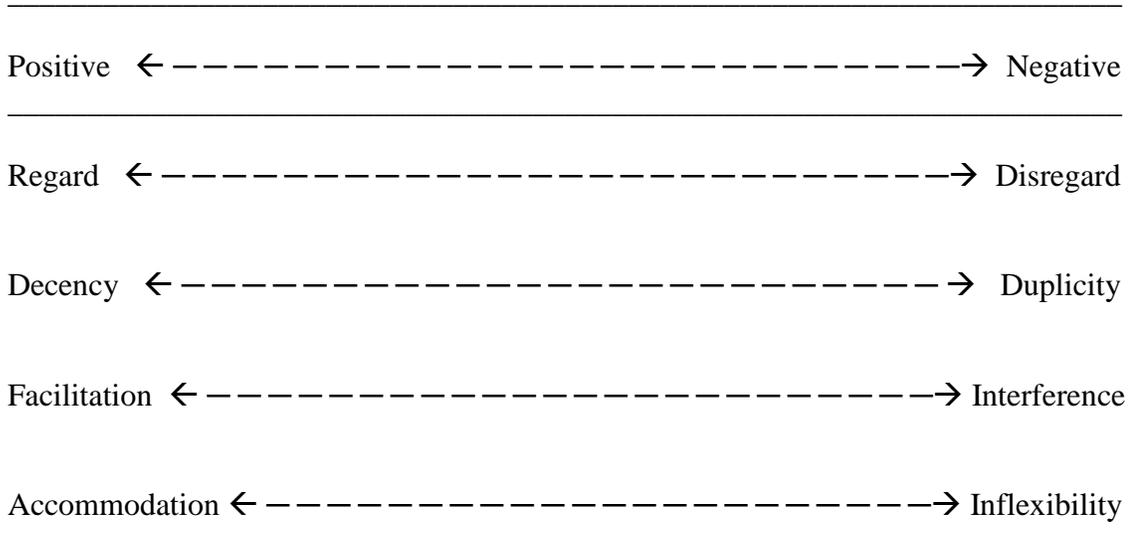
### *Significant Experiences with Shared Parenting*

Stepcouples' narratives about their shared parenting experiences emerged as major dichotomous themes of positivity and negativity. Analysis of these narratives also revealed core thematic categories which characterize these positive and negative narratives. The couples shared positive narratives of *regard, decency, facilitation* and *accommodation*, and negative narratives of *disregard, duplicity, interference*, and *inflexibility*. These themes can be viewed as dichotomous dimensions of positivity and negativity, where regard-disregard, decency-duplicity, facilitation-interference, and accommodation-inflexibility are polar opposites on their particular dimension. Narratives about negative experiences of disregard, duplicity, interference and inflexibility and are on one pole of the dimension and narratives about positive experiences of regard,

decency, facilitation and accommodation are on the opposing pole of the dimension. See Figure 1 for a diagram of the dichotomous thematic dimensions identified in the narrative data.

Figure 1

*Dichotomous Narrative Dimensions of Shared Parenting Experiences*



*Regard–Disregard Dimension*

The first major theme identified in the stepcouple narratives centers on communicative behavior which demonstrated regard and disregard for the stepparent partners. The narratives which focused on the demonstration of *regard* tended to describe experiences which legitimized the roles of the stepparent partners and the importance of them in the children's lives. Laurie, the biomother of an 11-year-old boy named Evan describes an experience where the boy's biofather called her to consult about guidance for their son. She describes the telephone conversation.

And then I figured he was going to say that he was going to move in with his girlfriend. I just assumed it was about that, and he called and was like, fast and

quick, have you talked to him about drugs, and alcohol? You know, and I'm trying to make sure, you know, he said, "I'm really trying to make sure I clean up my act and talk to Evan about it, and I need to." And so we had a nice talk about that, and I have told people about that, that that was a nice step that it was very nice for Dave to call about that.

In this case, the initiated consultation was perceived as legitimating the biomother's role as parent in the child's life. It demonstrates a regard for that role on the part of the shared parenting participant, the biofather.

This same biofather also demonstrated regard for the child's stepfather, Bill, in a separate experience. Laurie describes a situation in which Dave, the biofather, communicates a legitimation of the parenting role that Bill plays in Evan's life.

Um, this happened, I think last Father's Day...Dave came to pick up Evan, and I had made, as I usually do when he doesn't have a woman in his life that he's married to, I make sure Evan gets him presents. And even when he was married to Martha, I would help him...And, Dave came over and said, Bill wasn't there, he said, "I'm so sorry I missed Bill 'cause I really wanted to tell him today, on Father's Day, how much I appreciate what he does. I want you to make sure you tell him...I just wanted him to know how much I really, really appreciate the fathering he does."

By acknowledging and expressing appreciation for the stepfather's fathering role in the child's life the biofather displays regard or respect for that parenting role. Carrie, a stepmother to 8-year-old Elizabeth, shares a similar experience of a bioparent respecting the parenting role of the stepparent. She describes the kinds of conversations she and her stepdaughter's biomother, Louise, have regarding Elizabeth.

Louise and I have had some fairly lengthy conversations about things like when certain discussions should take place with Elizabeth. For instance, Elizabeth asks me a lot of questions about sex and I generally answer Elizabeth. But, I mention it to Louise that she and I have had this conversation. And I will tell her specifically what I told Elizabeth and we sort of go back and forth about what else she needs to know and what we think is appropriate. And it is pretty mutually beneficial, I think.

In this case, there is mutual regard expressed in the legitimation that each woman offers the other in her role as a parent to Elizabeth. By collaborating on the proper timing of sexual education each woman is demonstrating a certain regard for the other's parenting role.

Sometimes it is the role of the newly formed family in the child's life which is acknowledged with regard. Rachel, the stepmother of two teenage girls and the mother of two teenage girls, describes an experience where her stepdaughters' biomother, Jane, invited Rachel's family to her daughter's birthday party.

It was Jodi's birthday and she [Jane] wanted to invite us over for cake and ice cream. And, so, she called Paul to say she was going to invite us. And then she called me ... and she's like "Well, you can come if you want, but I understand if you won't" then I was like "I don't have a problem. You know I'm not going anywhere. I'm here and I'm in it for the long haul."

By including her daughter's stepfamily in the birthday celebration, the biomother acknowledges and demonstrates regard for the role of her daughters' stepfamily in her daughters' lives. In these cases, a regard for the family roles is largely communicated indirectly through inclusion, but also directly through expressed appreciation.

On the opposing end of the regard-disregard dimension pole is the communication of *disregard*. Couples shared experiences which tended to demonstrate low levels of regard for parenting decisions, the family's role, and family boundaries. Joan, a biomother of a 10-year-old boy named Brad, describes an experience where her son's father disregarded her decision to not enroll her son in hockey again.

So the next year I decided Brad wasn't going to play hockey. And this was the first time I had said, you know, "I'm a parent, and I get to choose," and there were many reasons why. Well, he uh, signed him up. And I [was not happy] about that. So, this is a story that we've talked about a lot, and he was like, "Yeah, he's going to play hockey." So, it ended up me having to pull the custodial card and say, you

know, "I'm not, I can't, I'm not going to pay for this. And, I'm not going to participate in the financial arrangement. And, I'm also, don't...you can't count on me to participate."

By signing Brad up for hockey when Joan had decided against it, the biofather communicated little regard for Joan's parenting decisions and her role as a parent to Brad. Erin, a biomother of a 14-year-old girl and a 12-year-old boy, shares a similar story of parental role disregard when her daughter's biofather, Milton, agreed to let the girl get a tattoo after her mother had decided she couldn't until she was 18 years old.

Um, I promised her, you know, which is funny, I'm like, "You know, when you're 18, if you want, I'll buy you your first tattoo. But you're not getting one until you're 18." And I know that Milton was like, "They won't let you get tattooed and pierced? Okay, I will."

The biofather communicated a disregard for Joan's parenting decisions by offering to allow the daughter to do something that Joan and her husband had forbidden her to do.

In addition to disregarding parental decisions, couples also tended to share narratives about little regard for the importance of the newly formed family in the children's lives, and also for parental roles. Alan, the biofather of a 5-year-old boy named Jason and stepfather to a 6-year-old boy named Devon, describes an experience where the role of his son's stepfamily was not recognized as significant by his son's biomother, Janice.

There was a time that if I called to talk to him [Jason], he would talk to me for awhile, but then he would want to talk to our son Devon and then to Lorraine [Jason's stepmother], because she is in his family. I guess for a few months, when she [Janice] was in the room or got wind of it, she would say, "No you talk to your father. You shouldn't be talking to those other people. Give your dad the phone." And then of course Jason would be hurt and he would even be in tears. "How come Mommy won't let me talk to Lorraine or Mommy won't let me talk to Devon?"

Alan's description of events reveals that his son's biomother, the shared parenting participant, deliberately disregards the role of her son's stepfamily as important in his life. By not allowing her son to communicate with his stepfamily she is devaluing these stepfamily relationships and thus disregarding the stepfamily role. Alan's wife, Lorraine, shares a similar experience.

I think what has become a problem is that all the time, I do all the clothes shopping for the kids. And initially I would buy clothes for Jason, or we would mail packages to him that had clothes and things. And she [Janice] wouldn't let him wear the clothes.

Again, this story describes an experience which communicated a disregard for roles of the child's stepfamily members. In this case, not allowing the child to wear clothes purchased by the stepmother communicates a disregard for her parental role in the child's life.

Sometimes the disregard for the stepfamily occurs with regard to overstepping boundaries. So, there is little regard for the division between the separate families when the shared parenting participant transgresses a line drawn by the shared parenting partners. Rob, the biofather of two boys aged 9 and 11 and stepfather to two boys aged 8 and 10 describes experiences where his sons' biomother, Susan, did not respect the boundaries of his new stepfamily.

I tried to comply as much as I can, just to appease her and get her off my case. Yeah, I will do whatever. And she was quite dependent and basically pushed her way around. And since then I have had to put my foot down and say "No, I am not going to help you, not going to provide you that, you can't just do whatever you want or stop by." When we [he and his wife, Felicia] first got together, and moved into the house, she just came over to the house and just came in and wanted to go over the schedule with her [Felicia]. And I had to get something, and she [Susan] went upstairs to the kid's room with the youngest, and after that I was like, "No."

Rob's description of events reveal that there was a period of time where the shared parenting participant, Susan, did not demonstrate regard for the divorced status boundaries Rob desired or the private home boundaries most families enjoy. She "pushed her way around" and would "stop by" and finally Rob put his foot down to establish limits and distance between her and his new family. However, Susan continued to disregard these boundaries when she "just came over," came in, and even went to other parts of the house uninvited by Rob and Felicia. While regard for the shared parenting participants is largely communicated indirectly through inclusion and directly through expressed appreciation, disregard was seen to occur with exclusion and even intrusion. Certain family members were excluded as important or as playing a parenting role with the ability to have rules upheld, and sometime there was an intrusion into the new family life which disregarded the boundaries of the new family.

#### *Decency–Duplicity Dimension*

The decency-duplicity dimension is the second major theme which emerged from the stepcouple's narratives. Such narratives described experiences which involved displays on the dichotomous dimension of decency or duplicity toward the stepcouples or the stepfamily children on the part of the shared parenting participants. Displays of *decency* often involve doing what is expected and reasonable or right according to the stepcouple. Terri, a biomother of two girls aged 12 and 9 and a stepmother to two girls aged 19 and 10 describes how in spite of a difficult time she was having with her girls' biofather – they were involved in a major conflict over the summer schedule at the time – he still upheld an agreement which provided for the girls to spend a week each summer at their grandparents' house.

He...we agreed to, even though it was still kind of rough to agree to this year, we agree to every summer [that] they get to spend one week in each grandparents' house. And I take my week vacation with them during the summer and let them go to my mother's. But I'm okay with this as long as he allowed them to spend a week with my parents. So we did that. And I took them from my parents and dropped them off at his parents. So, now they're getting to spend a week with his parents. So, we got to do that...[Terri's husband Randy adds]: And they love it [Terri]: They love it, they absolutely love it. So, that's a positive thing.

By setting aside the conflict and keeping his word on the agreement to let the children visit their maternal grandparents on his summer visitation, the biofather displayed decency and trustworthiness toward the stepcouple and the children. Lisa, the biomother of two boys aged 15 and 8 and the stepmother of two girls aged 7 and 4, describes how her sons' biofather is responsible with the child support.

He is on paper a good parent. He pays the child support on time, in fact, early. There was a point where my mobile park got sold and the new owners were in Orlando. So I had to send the check 5 days early to make sure it got there. At that point, he was paying the check on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the month and I asked if it was possible to pay in the middle of the month, because I would like to have the money there, before I actually send the check.... And he was like "Okay." And he has been very good about it, at least by the 20<sup>th</sup>...So, the kids will at least have a roof over their head.

The biofather of Lisa's children demonstrates decency by being dependable and responsible when it comes to fulfilling his financial obligations.

Often experiences involving displays of decency involve actions which benefit the children. Leslie, a biomother of two boys aged 14 and 10, describes a time when her sons' biofather, Neal, "stepped up" and was there for her son.

Okay, my oldest son attends um, therapy. When he first started to begin therapy Neal did take out of his time to attend our therapy sessions. You know me, him, and my son...So, Neal stepped up with that. And that was a positive experience I think. I think it was significant.

By choosing to participate in the family therapy sessions for his son, Neal demonstrated parental responsibility and decency which was positive and significant according to Leslie. Similar experiences of responsibility and dependability were expressed by other participants. Bill, a stepfather to Laurie's 11-year-old son, Evan, compares the current experiences he has with Evan's biofather being responsible when previously he would not show up to collect Evan when promised.

I'll say he got his act together, and just became better, and better to interact with. He became responsible...He became sensitive instead of being what I thought was callous. Then I thought he just generally reached out, that he went into areas that he wouldn't have went into normally, but that he did this thing for his son. I respected that....He at least tries to come through on what he says.

A similar appreciation for a biofather's decency in parenting is expressed by Cameron, a stepfather to his wife's two boys aged 12 and 10 and biofather to two boys aged 13 and 11. He says of his stepson's biofather, "I think he's, you know, he's somebody I see as having strong ethics, you know. He knows what's important when it comes to the boys, and it's all been good." These stepfathers appreciate that the biofathers are behaving with integrity when it comes to parenting their children. Others express appreciation for the SPP's decency in rising to challenges of time and participation and being generally dependable.

On the opposing end of the decency-duplicity dimension pole is displays of *duplicity*. Couples who shared experiences of duplicity often told stories of dishonesty and breaches of trust when dealing with the shared parenting participants. Alan, the biofather of a 5-year-old boy named Jason and stepfather to a 6-year-old boy named Devon, describes an experience where Jason's biomother broke an agreement they had which would allow Jason to live with Alan for a three month period.

I flew down to Arizona to get the last of the furniture out of the apartment down there. I took some things to her sister's house. Once she knew she had her belongings, she called to tell me that I don't need to come past the house, because I am not getting Jason, that I am arrogant and that I need to be humbled, um yeah.... and therefore wasn't going to get my son...So that Sunday I showed up at the doorstep, but didn't, you know, I said, "Hey, I have been humbled, can I have my son now?" That didn't come to pass; I didn't get my son. That kind of started the whole legal wrangle.

By breaking the agreement that Jason was to live with Alan for a three-month period, Jason's biomother demonstrated duplicity when sharing parenting with Alan. Alan was not able to trust her to keep her word about the arrangement. Mike, the biofather of four children with ages ranging from 11 to 23 describes the types of experiences he has had with his children's biomother behaving duplicitously. For example, he was supposed to have the children for Christmas and the children's biomother decided not to let him have them after all.

We might be making plans to go down for Christmas. And then we make the plan and then Brenda, behind us, will say "Well I changed my mind; you're not taking the kids down to Connecticut for Christmas." You know, they're supposed to be with me on Christmas and even though she gave us the go ahead like weeks before hand, she'll come back and slam it down and say, "Nope you can't take the kids. If you want, you can take them down there maybe the day after Christmas." You know so it's always like a flip flop with her.

Mike's experiences with Brenda reflect a pattern of duplicity, where it is "always like a flip flop with her." He cannot trust that she will uphold the agreements she makes with him and his wife.

Sometimes the experiences of duplicity involve dishonesty. Rob and Felicia describe a time when Susan, the biomother of Rob's two boys aged 9 and 11, lied about not having access to a car to drive her son to the emergency room and to take him to a follow up appointment the next day.

[Rob]: And she has been very deceptive, and all that. It turns out her car does work. [Felicia]: [S]he claimed that one day she couldn't take the youngest, who was in the emergency room the night before, to the doctor for a follow-up. So, I agreed to do it. When I went to go pick him up, she pulled into the parking lot right before me and was unloading groceries from her car, that was working. And so, when I picked Larry up, I was like, "Oh, really"... [Rob]: And the night before she couldn't take the kid to the emergency room, she couldn't take the youngest and she called like four times and finally on the fourth call, I figure it might be an emergency. And she said his eye was swollen and bleeding and she didn't have a car to take him to the emergency room. I showed up there to take him to the emergency room and it turned out to be fine, it was just an allergic reaction. And the next day, we schedule the follow-up appointment; she refused to take any phone calls from us to take him to the appointment. So, that is where Felicia went in and picked him up to take him to the doctor for the follow-up.

Susan, who has been "very deceptive," displays duplicity by lying about her car having broken down rendering her incapable of taking her son to the hospital and doctor's appointment. While dependability and general principled conduct characterize the narratives about decency, duplicity was often manifested as lies and broken agreements. The shared parenting partners are not seen as dependable or trustworthy. Although the selected narratives about decency were told about biofathers and the narratives about dependability were told about biomothers, these were simply the narratives chosen among the many examples and do not reflect a gender difference in the data.

#### *Facilitation–Interference Dimension*

The facilitation-interference dimension included narratives which described experiences that involved the shared parenting participants actively facilitating or interfering with the parenting activities of the stepcouples. Displays of *facilitation* often involved upholding disciplinary actions across households or participating in joint decision making regarding the children. Claudia, a stepmother to an 8-year-old boy

named Ryan, describes how Ryan's three parents collaborated on finding a tool to help him overcome his shyness.

They put him in karate – I say they – we put him in karate partly to kind of build up his self-esteem, get him involved in something that he can be proud of. And Ryan's personality has changed. He's still a little bit on the cautious side, but he's – you can tell he has more confidence. And that decision to put him in karate and the effect it's had on him has been positive and we've shared that with other people, that everybody who knew Ryan knew he was quiet and shy, but now when they're around him and he's more confident. And, you know, we say, "Yeah, karate really helped him." And, that was a joint decision.

In order for a decision to be jointly made it must be facilitated and supported by the parties involved. So, by participating in the decision to enroll Ryan in karate, Ryan's biomother facilitated his enrollment. A similar demonstration of facilitation of a joint decision was shared by Allison, the biomother of a 17-year-old boy named Eric. She explains how even though Eric earned the money to purchase his first car, she and Eric's biofather supported a joint decision for the ground rules for his car ownership.

We were in agreement that the car that was purchased had to be reliable. It had to be, you know, good on gas mileage. And, um, since it was going to be here and used by Eric coming and going from our house, as well as, going up to his dad's, that we'd be in agreement on the rules of car ownership.

By jointly agreeing to car purchase criteria and rules for ownership, Eric's biofather and Allison facilitated the car purchase project.

Other demonstrations of facilitation across shared parenting households involve enforcing discipline from one home to another. The shared parenting participant will uphold punishment and rules established in one home for what happened there, even after the child returns to his or her home. Laurie, the biomother of a 17-year-old girl explains that enforcing discipline across homes is a regular occurrence.

If there's a problem like if you catch her drinking or something, there's a discipline problem, then I always let them know something that's happened like they do me. So, that if she's grounded, she stays grounded when she gets over there.

Carrie, the stepmother to 8-year-old Elizabeth, shares a similar experience of the facilitation of discipline across households.

Elizabeth was in trouble here and she was grounded and we called Louise and said she was in trouble here. And Louise said, "Okay, if she is grounded there, she is grounded here."

Ruth is the biomomther of 12-year-old girl. She describes a time when the rules of the grounding the girl was given in Ruth's home were supported when Ruth returned to her biofather's home.

She did get disciplined, I don't know, about middle of last year; she got in trouble for getting a MySpace account, 'cause we told her "no." And, she was grounded completely from the computer and stuff. And he did completely follow through with that, and not allow her to have any computer time or anything.

These stories of enforcing discipline and rules across households demonstrate facilitation and support for the stepcouples' parenting decisions. Similarly, when decision making for the children is shared, it demonstrates mutual facilitation for the decided upon course of action between the parents in the two households. The decisions in one home are upheld and enforced in the other, or the decisions are mutually agreed upon.

The opposing pole of the facilitation dimension is *interference*. Narratives involving interference included sabotaging communication between the children and the stepcouple, as well as preventing the stepcouples from spending time with the children. Alan describes interference he has experienced from his 5-year-old son Jason's biomother when attempting to see him during his scheduled time.

She'll have some kind of odd reason why she feels like I should not be able to spend the time I'm supposed to have with my son. It's his last week of school, he needs to say good bye to his friends that live in the same city he does. So, therefore, he shouldn't be with his dad. Or it's the third week of school and, therefore, he's still making friends. So, therefore, he shouldn't be with his dad, or odd stuff like that.

Jason's biomother invents "odd" reasons why it is not in Jason's best interest to spend this particular time with his son. Consequently, she actively interferes with the scheduled parenting time that Alan is supposed to enjoy with him. Another example of interference with parenting time is shared by Bill, a stepfather to a 14-year-old girl and a 12-year-old boy.

Yeah, he puts them in – of all the other things that he likes to do – is put them in programs that are scheduled for practices on the nights that we're supposed to have them, so that we can't get them. And they go, like, we're supposed to have them every Thursday and coincidentally the football league that he just put Alec in, it practices every Thursday. So, he does these very underhanded, sneaky, little jabs.

By scheduling the children's sports activities during Bill and Erin's scheduled parenting time, the biofather of the children ultimately demonstrates "underhanded" interference with their time with the children. Sometimes the interference occurs with regard to communication between the stepcouples and the children. Doreen, a biomother of a 7-year-old boy and 6-year-old girl, and her husband Kyle describe how their children's biofather interferes with their telephone conversations with the children when they are in his home.

[Doreen]: He sabotages phone conversations. Like, we'll call and you know, he will start tickling the kids and play a game, and cut the TV on or ...[Kyle]: while they are on the phone... [Doreen]:... or creating chaos so that they can't sit down.

In this case, the children's biofather creates interference in the shared parenting when he "sabotages" the telephone conversations that Doreen and Bill are attempting to have with

the children when they are not in their home. Interference occurs when the shared parenting participants create obstructions to the stepcouples spending time with the children and also to conversations they wish to have with them. When facilitation, the opposing end of the facilitation-interference dimension is displayed, it manifests as assistance with decisions and the enforcement of decisions about discipline across households.

#### *Accommodation–Inflexibility Dimension*

The fourth thematic dimension which emerged in the narrative analysis is comprised of the opposing poles of accommodation and inflexibility. Often narratives with the *accommodation* theme involved the voluntary adjustment to schedule changes for the children or the stepcouples. Robin, the biomother of two girls aged 9 and 5, says she has a lot of experiences where schedule changes are accommodated on both sides of the shared parenting.

We've had a lot of positive ones basically. When he wants, when they're having a party on a day that we're supposed to have her, they've always been you know willing to let Eleanor decide what she wants to do, whether she wants to go to the party. And both families are really good at doing that.

In Robin's case, there is a mutual understanding that there should be accommodation across households so that the children can participate in activities with both families. Both families willingly accommodate the changes in schedules which come up for social situations. Erin, a biomother of a 14-year-old girl and a 12-year-old boy, appreciated that her children's biofather was willing to accommodate an opportunity they had to travel in Europe. She said, "He did let them go to Europe. We didn't forget about that." So, this accommodation she experienced is something which is significant enough and

appreciated enough to be worthy of remembering. Lisa, the biomother of two boys aged 15 and 8 describes a time where she had to cancel plans for her youngest son to go camping with his biofather and also ask that the biofather, Marvin, take the oldest son with him the following weekend. She made two requests for changes in the schedule which required accommodation by the children's biofather.

He is my youngest and it is going to be cold, because it is September, and it is not like summer camping. So, I called Marvin up and asked him. I let him know one that Walt wasn't going, and he was like, "That's okay." And I let him know that next weekend, he is taking Kevin next weekend too, and he was like "okay"...It was great.

Marvin changed his camping plans two weekends in a row at Lisa's request. By being willing to modify his plans for the time he would spend with his sons, Marvin was accommodating to Lisa's needs. She was pleased with this accommodation and appreciated his willingness to do it. Often the accommodation displayed in this positive pole of the cooperation dimension of the shared parenting narratives involves the children's activities or the social activities for one of the families involved.

On the opposing pole of the cooperation dimension is *inflexibility*. Narratives describing inflexibility include attempts to modify the children's schedule or to accommodate changes in arranging the transfer of the children between homes. Terri, a biomother of two girls aged 12 and 9, and her husband, Randy, describe how they attempted to have more time with her girls by watching them while the girls' biofather and stepmother were working at night.

I, who am home at night, 'cause they work nights, I'm at home – we're both home at night – he stated to us... when we told him we would watch the kids and he could come pick them up, that we would be happy to watch them...[Randy adds]: For free. [Terri continues]: For free, we wouldn't charge him and we were even gonna reduce his child support payments to help him out for everything. You

know all this stuff we're trying ...because it would give me, us, more parenting time with them, if he allowed that to happen. So, he prefers [not].

Terri and Randy had tried to initiate a plan which they believed would be beneficial for all involved. If they watched the children in the evenings while the other parents were at work, then the kids would be with family, she would get more time with them, and their biofather and stepmother would save money on babysitters. She even offered to reduce his child support payments if he would accommodate this request. The children's biofather, however, did not want to deviate from the children's schedule and the court ordered parenting time they were to share. He was unwilling to be flexible and accommodating to this request.

Another type of situation where inflexibility was experienced involved changing pick up and drop off locations for the child. Alan, the biofather of a 6-year-old boy describes the biomother's inflexibility when asked to change a prearranged plan.

It's... when I used to ask to do something different, um, it becomes...I mean, God forbid I need to change the pickup, the place where I drop, where she would pick him up, because whoever picks up, picks up... it's something where she would rather take a extra bus out of her way then do something that might make sense, because it's also going to be easier for me too. So, it's just odd.

In this account Alan describes a situation, or a series of experiences, where he attempted to deviate from the regular arrangement and his request was not accommodated. He believes this to be "odd" as, like Terri and Randy, the request was not accommodated even though it may have been beneficial for the recipient of the request. The child's biomother displayed inflexibility toward Alan and his perceived reasonable requests. In the narratives which related experiences of accommodation toward a deviation from plans, the shared parenting participants willingly adjusted to the requested change in the

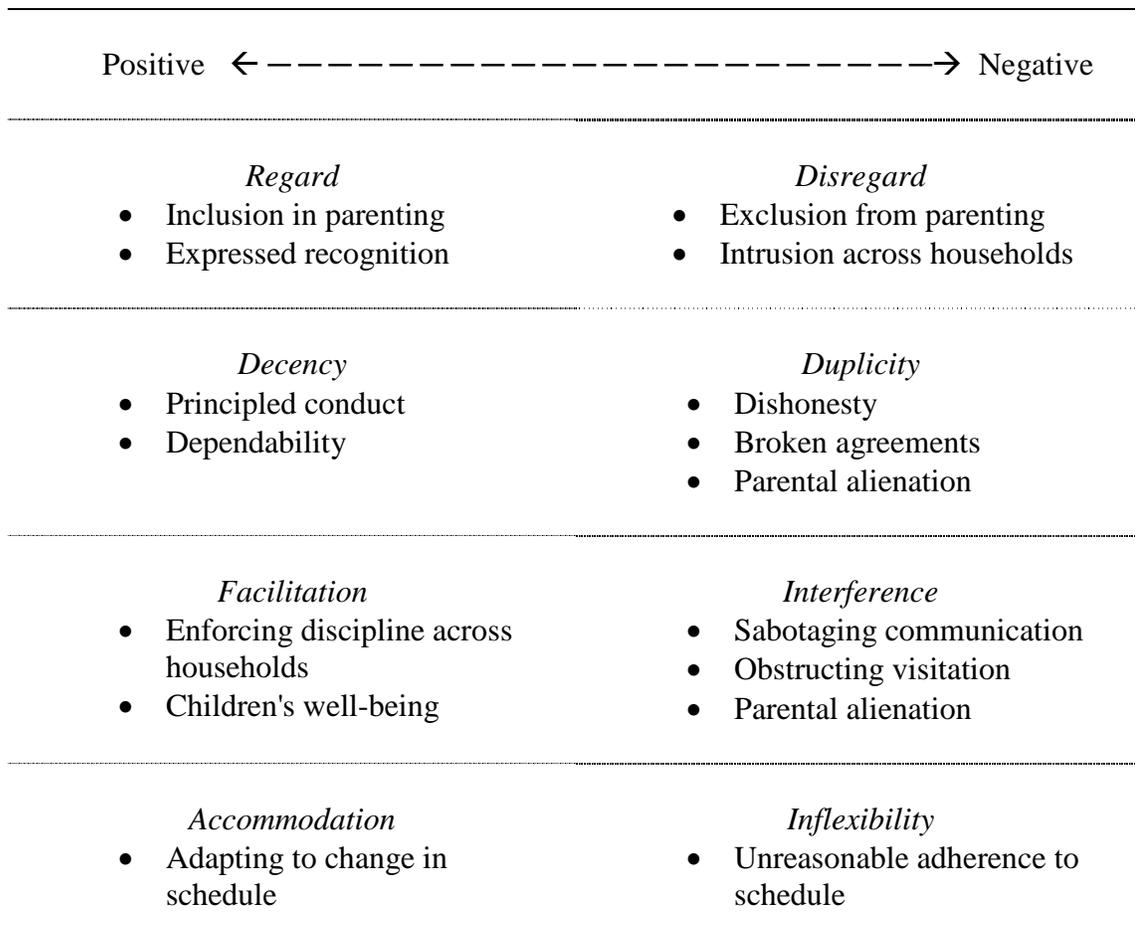
children's and parents schedule. Inflexibility was manifested in seemingly unreasonable rejections of the proposed modifications.

#### *Summary of Dichotomous Dimensions*

In sum, the four dichotomous dimensions identified in the narrative data were regard-disregard, decency-duplicity, facilitation-interference, and accommodation-inflexibility. Within each of these dimensions are dichotomous themes which reflect the positive and negative poles of each dimensional landscape. The narratives in each positive and negative aspect of a dimension exhibited certain types of experiences where the dimensional pole might be manifested. For example, disregard, a negative aspect of the respect dimension, was displayed through not recognizing or legitimizing the role of the parent. The types of experiences which were recounted in narratives and which comprise the particular poles of each dimension are displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2

*Shared Parenting Narrative Experiences by Dimension*



*Turning Points in Shared Parenting Interactions*

Analysis of the shared parenting narratives of stepcouples revealed eight major turning points or catalysts for change in the quality of the interactions and relationships across households. In the course of the interviews, the couples told stories about their shared parenting experiences which explained why the shared parenting interactions and relationships had changed at certain times. These eight catalysts for change include 1) *legal maneuvers*, 2) *duplicity*, 3) *the marriage or divorce (including cohabitation) of the*

*shared parenting participant*, 4) *communicative acts*, 5) *communicative agency*, 6) *boundary setting*, 7) *overtures* and 8) *general maturation*. Some of these themes are consistent with a few of the dichotomous narrative dimensions which emerged in the data analysis on significant experiences. Certain of those experiences such as duplicity or regard were significant to the stepcouples because they caused a turning point in the shared parenting interactions and relationships. Also, the turning point of marriage of the parent in the other household, for example, could mean less flexibility with the schedule or more interference in visitation. See Figure 3, for a list of interactional and relational turning points which emerged in the stepcouples' narratives.

Figure 3

*Turning Points in Shared Parenting Interactions and Relationships*

|                                      |                      |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Legal Maneuvers                      | Duplicity            |
| Change in Romantic Relational Status | Boundary Setting     |
| Conversations                        | Communicative Agency |
| Overtures                            | General Maturation   |

*Legal Maneuvers*

The first narrative theme to emerge as a turning point in the shared parenting interactions and relationships is legal maneuvers. The quality of the interactions changed when the shared parenting participant initiated legal action. This legal action usually

occurred with regard to financial (child support) or custody matters, but also included restraining orders, accusations of domestic violence or child mistreatment, and attempts to relocate the child out of state. For example, Blair and Trevor, who share parenting of Trevor's three children aged 12, 10 and 5, describe how the interactions got worse after they filed a modification in child custody.

[Blair]:...there was already bad feelings between everybody before, you know, everything, the modification for child custody was filed. So, things went from bad to worse after that got filed. And then they became you know, with the children they began their good behavior. And then they went on a mission to turn the kids away from us. And basically things got really bad in our household um, like around January, February, March of this year...they were awful. The kids were just... [Trevor]: disrespectful.

For this couple the shared parenting interactions and even the relationships with Trevor's children took a turn for the worse after they took legal action to gain full custody of the children. They believe that the parents in the other household retaliated by turning the children against them, a duplicitous act. Doreen and Kyle, who share parenting of Doreen's two children aged 7 and 6, also saw a change in their shared parenting interactions after taking legal action. Doreen filed a restraining order on her children's biofather after he broke into the house. Kyle describes how this impacted the biofather's behavior.

So, I think he finally...so for a while there he felt bullet proof for the stuff he was doing. And then that happened, and I think that, whether he's got people telling him to stop being stupid or not, but he's finally, he's calmed down, you know in the last six months...Yeah. So that's, you know, I think that ... it's probably gotten...to the point where you know if she would get on the phone and talk to the kids he would just hang up, so he doesn't do that anymore.

In Doreen and Kyle's case taking legal action improved the interactions across households. It caused the children's biofather to be calmer and to not hang up on Doreen

when she calls to talk to the children. Kyle seems to believe that the legal action led to maturity in the biofather in that he stopped the problematic behavior.

### *Duplicity*

The second turning point in the interactions is unscrupulous behaviors, usually involving breaking an agreement or general moral code (e.g., don't tell lies). Mike, the biofather of four children describes a time when he was falsely accused of assault by his children's biomother. She had decided to kick their 15-year-old daughter, Karla, out of the house and called him to come and pick her up. After he left and had gone to dinner with his wife and daughter and they were all home in bed, the police came and arrested him for allegedly assaulting the biomother during the pick up.

How do you even file a report of assault and battery especially if it's an ex-spouse, you know? They automatically put in place the procedure and the police, the policeman told me "We're just doing a procedure, Mike. We don't know what happened." But, you know, I mean the cops in the car apologized for doing what they had to do. And I said "I understand you're just doing your job..." She falsified a police report which apparently, I guess you can do...She behaved the same, um, like nothing ever happened. But on my end, I will never forget what she did. And the way I communicate, and deal with her, is very, very different today.

The biomother's unscrupulous behavior of filing a false police report was a catalyst for change in the shared parenting interactions across households. A situation discussed early as an example of duplicity also constituted a turning point for Lorraine and Alan, when Alan's son's biomother, Janice, refused to allow him to have Jason for the three-month period they had agreed upon.

[Lorraine]: I think the most significant [experience] was when Alan went [to get Jason] in October, 2005 and she said, "No." [Alan]: Oh man. [Lorraine]: I think that had the biggest impact on our relationship and I think everything else that has happened between us and Janice regarding Jason has kind of stemmed from that.

This duplicitous act on the part of the biomother had a significant impact and has had a lasting negative change on this stepcouple's relationship and interactions with their shared parenting participant.

### *Change in Romantic Relational Status*

The third turning point is the marriage or divorce of the shared parenting participant in the other household. Sometimes this union helps improve the communication across households and other times it makes it more difficult. Laurie describes how when her son's biofather, David, married, the shared parenting was challenging and then became better when he divorced.

I think it's a lot better. We, it was, there's a lot of water under the bridge, you know, and there were a lot of...when Evan's father...left me for Martha, and um she was a very possessive woman, so she was really, believed that she had to control the relationship. David was never allowed...to come in my house, you know. He wasn't, she told him he couldn't come inside the house, and you know. So it was more difficult when they were together. It was more difficult because she was very demanding in terms of holidays and things like that. She was very, um, it was challenging. It was very, very challenging. They have since gotten a divorce.

Laurie experienced a change for the better in shared parenting when the biofather changed his romantic relational status. The presence of the biofather's spouse made shared parenting difficult and challenging for her and her husband. She perceived that the stepmother was inflexible with the schedule and interfered in the shared parenting. Other couples experience a change for the better when the shared parenting participant in the other household marries. Bob and Carrie have had this experience of positive change.

[Carrie]: I think they improved when she got married. [Bob]: Significantly.  
[Carrie]: Yeah, her husband is a little bit older and very rational and logical and I think he kind of grounds her a little bit. She used to be very panicky about issues with Elizabeth as far as when we wanted more visitation, and she would get really

freaked out. She now has him as a sounding board for what is reasonable and I think it has significantly improved the relationship.

In Carrie and Bob's case, the marriage of the shared parenting partner significantly improved the relations because they believe the new spouse encouraged the biomother to be more reasonable.

### *Conversations*

The fourth turning point in the shared parenting interactions stems from a change in standard communication procedures between the shared parenting participants. Rachel and Paul had a strained relationship with Paul's daughters' biomother. Rachel, who is the stepmother to Paul's two teenage daughters and who has two teenage daughters herself explains how she accepted an invitation by her stepdaughters' biomother to attend a family event in the other household. Paul indicates that this conversation changed the shared parenting relationship.

[Rachel]: So, I just kind of, I think in the beginning I stayed out of it for a while. But then one day we just ...we had a conversation. Because in the beginning it would be stares or whatever, you know? She didn't like me and that was okay. But then just, I think for the kids, and I remember because it was Jodi's [Paul's daughter] birthday and she wanted to invite us over for cake and ice cream. And so she called Paul to say she was going to invite us and then she called me. And we just kind of, and she's like "Well, you can come if you want but I understand if you won't" then I was like "I don't have a problem. You know I'm not going anywhere. I'm here and I'm in it for the long haul."... [Paul]: I think it changed kind of with that conversation, you know. Yeah, I think it stemmed from that in terms of "Okay, we've got to kind of adjust to this."

Paul's daughters' biomother made an overture to include the parents in the other household in a family event. When they accepted the invitation, it expanded the boundaries between the two families and created a positive change in the relationship.

These two women demonstrated mutual regard for the parenting and familial role of the

other. Another stepmother, Jordan, who shares parenting of her husband, Pete's 8-year-old daughter, Amanda, says they had relatively friendly interactions across households and attended some family events together until she and the biomother had an argument about coordinating drop off for Amanda. Jordan had driven 45 minutes to the drop-off location and was kept waiting an addition 45 minutes.

I was pretty upset and I made it clear to her that I thought the communication lines were terrible, and again she told me it was none of my business. And this was after seven and one-half years, and it is my business....The only thing that's different is the first, I would say six years, I never said, I never opened my mouth to her. Like I never, like she would yell at me or she would get snitty with me or anything, I would just not say anything and I'm not that way now. I'll, I mean if she says something, I'll say something back. [Now] she refuses to sit down and talk with both of us. I've already asked her. She refuses, because she told me, because she doesn't care about our house at all. She doesn't care what we do here. She doesn't care what Amanda does here. It's Amanda's life over here, it's not hers and she doesn't want to be included in it. Likewise, she doesn't want Amanda to come home and really tell her about what she did here. She doesn't care.

Jordan became more assertive with the biomother and insisted that she had a right to have an opinion about how things were handled across households. She refused to be disregarded as a legitimate parent. After this change in her communication approach with the biomother, the shared parenting relationship became less friendly. While certain communicative acts can lead to a more positive relationship across households, others can change the relationships in a negative way.

#### *Communicative Agency*

Sometimes stepcouples experienced a turning point in the quality of the shared parenting interactions and relationship when the communicative agent in the other household changed. In Rachel's case, communicating about shared parenting issues with her ex-mother-in-law greatly improved her experience with shared parenting. She

described her interactions with her daughters' biofather as hostile and she needed to use a center designed for drop-offs and pick-ups of her daughters.

[It was] hostile, horrible...very, very, it's very strange, incredibly strange. Um, so that's changed. It's good. I don't really say it's the best, because sometimes ex-in-laws aren't the best. But she, you know, we both try really hard to make it work, and to make it smooth for the girls.

By changing communicative agents in the shared parenting communication, the shared parenting partners were able to "make it work." There was more facilitation for the children's well-being across households. Sometimes involving the stepparent in the shared parenting communication improved the interactions and relationship across households. Jim and Lisa describe how when she took over the communication with Jim's daughters' biomother the quality of the interactions across households improved.

[Jim] So, I would say they have improved...when Lisa involved herself in my communication with Molly. [Lisa]: I had to...again, because I was purposeful from the beginning, I knew what I wanted to do with her and every step was to that end. [Jim]: I would say, because she had in mind what she wanted to accomplish and pursued it very purposefully and kind of set the grounds on how to deal with Molly, and kind of allowed me to deal with Molly in a civil way.

### *Boundary Setting*

The shared parenting interactions changed when shared parenting participants established limitations in the interactions across households. Felicia describes how their interactions became less cordial when the biomother of her husband Rob's two boys rejected the limitations they placed on the areas of the home she was welcome to occupy.

I think when it changed from cordial to not, is when she came into the house, our house, when we first moved in with each other, and took it upon herself to just go upstairs. Rob went and asked her to please come back downstairs and she didn't appreciate that request. So, then she got upset with Rob. And I finally came into the picture and said, "You need to get out of my house, now." And then she wouldn't leave the yard and the kids were around. And so from that point on, she told Rob, "We don't get along anymore." That was when the relationship changed.

Felicia and Rob had different ideas of the boundaries between the two households than did Rob's children's biomother. They rejected the disregard she demonstrated by trespassing in parts of their home which were off-limits. Setting these limitations meant to her that they no longer "get along" and according to Felicia the relationship became less cordial after that. Jordan and Pete also had a turning point in their relationship with Pete's daughter's biomother when Jordan set boundaries for her parental role in the driving she was willing to do for the exchanges between homes. The quality of the interactions took a downward turn.

[Pete]: Yeah, they've diminished. [Jordan]: When we were getting along, it was great, but it was because I was driving every time. And, the reason is because I drive right past their house to go to and from work. And, so I would drop her off on my way to work, and I would pick her up on my way home from work. So, nobody had to drive her. And I was just, it was the best thing in the world. But, as soon as I said, "Listen, you're her mother, you've got to do some of this stuff too." It was "whoa." It was bad.

Jordan's decisions to limit the involvement she had with the managing of her stepdaughter's transportation, essentially setting boundaries for her parental role, resulted in a negative turning point in the shared parenting relationship.

### *Overtures*

Sometimes an invitation or offering made between the two shared parenting households instigated a turning point in the shared parenting relationship. Usually overtures between the homes involved invitations to participate in events for the children. This was the case for the earlier narrative of Rachel's where a turning point resulted from a conversation which took place when an overture was made to include the parents in a birthday party for a shared child. The inclusion was an overture which offered regard

though inclusion. Sometimes the overtures were about doing thoughtful and caring things for the shared children. For example, Jordan, says that initially her stepdaughter's biomother "wouldn't even speak" to her or acknowledge her, but describes how this changed due to her offerings of things of value and general inclusion for their shared child.

She finally came around, and then I think that she realized how much I did do for Amanda, because I was the sole person picking her up and dropping her off every single time, for a long time. And I made...everything that I do for my daughter, I do for her. I, we have a Y membership for her. We have zoo passes for her. I mean anything that I buy my daughter, I buy for her. And I think that her mother finally realized that. And, um, so we really started to get along. She invited us over to her daughter, for Amanda's birthday party at their house, and I mean everything was going great.

In this case, Jordan's overtures resulted in an improvement in the shared parenting relationships. It also led to an overture from the biomother with an invitation to attend a birthday party for the child in her home. Jordan actively facilitated the exchanges and well-being of her stepdaughter. These overtures ultimately resulted in a relationship that was "going great."

### *General Maturation*

Often the changes seen in the shared parenting interactions were gradual and due to an increase in maturity on the part of the shared parenting participants. Charles, a biofather of an 8-year-old boy describes how the shared parenting relationship he and his wife have with his son's biomother has gotten better because she has matured.

And she kept doing that, and she would like ... like she said, she would call CPS or do stuff like that to us, and was basically playing a game. And it wasn't, you know...and I think that's what is better now. She realizes, hey, this is for the kids, and I don't need to be doing that. And ...she's grown up a whole lot in the last, I'd say two to three years, you know, since it first started.

Charles believes that the shared parenting interactions have improved because his son's biomother has "grown up a whole lot." It seems that once this occurred she was less likely to engage in interference by "playing games." Sometimes the stepcouples recognize that it is also themselves which have grown up. Allison, who describes her shared parenting with her teen son's biofather as "standoffish" at first, says "Over time you learn to – well, I think we both made an effort to say that even though we weren't husband and wife, we were still parents to this child." Her statement implies that the shared parenting relationship had improved because both she and her son's biofather had learned over time. They had grown and matured.

#### *Summary of Shared Parenting Turning Points*

Stepcouples' narratives about their shared parenting experiences illuminated the types of events and behaviors which caused a change in the quality of relationships and the interactions across households. Legal maneuvers, duplicity, marriage or divorce, conversations, communicative agents, boundary setting, overtures and general maturation were responsible for turning points, positive and/or negative in the shared parenting across households. Also, these turning points can reflect certain communicative behaviors identified in the dichotomous dimensions of regard–disregard, decency–duplicity, facilitation–support, and accommodation–inflexibility. The next section discusses sense-making in shared parenting narratives.

#### *Narrative Construction of Meaning in Shared Parenting Interactions*

Analysis of the combined narratives about shared parenting experiences in the interviews for each couple uncovered two facets of the meaning shared parenting has for them. One facet of the meaning of shared parenting involves the manner in which the

situation impacts the couples. For some couples it is a situation in which they thrive, for others it is something with which they cope, and for the remaining group it is something which presents a struggle. Based on their narratives about their experiences with shared parenting, stepcouples were categorized in a typology of *thrivers*, *copers* and *strugglers*. The other facet of the meaning of shared parenting involved the degree to which the couples actually shared the thriving, coping or struggling experience with each other. Couples who were inclusive were categorized as *united*, and those who were not were categorized as *divided* in the shared parenting. The remainder of this section explores the qualities of these two stepcouple shared parenting typologies.

#### *Typology of Shared Parenting: Meaning as Impact*

Analysis of the narrative data allowed for the identification of the stepcouples' shared parenting experiences to fall into one of three types, based on how they seemed to make sense of what it means for them. For some stepcouples the shared parenting experience meant a struggle ( $n = 14$ ), for others it was simply something they cope with ( $n = 13$ ), and for a few ( $n = 5$ ) it is a situation in which they thrive. Thrivers tend to experience shared parenting as something which is more beneficial than not. It is often comfortable and effortless. Copers see shared parenting as an inconvenient aspect of their lives. It is something they tolerate, but is neither beneficial nor detrimental. Strugglers experience shared parenting interactions as something which takes great effort to grapple with. It is a struggle for them and a significant negative aspect of their lives.

Identification of the features of each of these types was made based on four factors: 1) direct definition in the form of explicit statements made about the cross household shared

parenting relationship, 2) narrative theme dimensions, 3) the expressed level of satisfaction in the interactions, and 4) the frequency of the interactions.

### *Direct Definition*

In the course of the interviews stepcouples were asked to describe their relationships with the person(s) with whom they share parenting. They thus often made explicit statements which described and defined the kind of relationship they had. In general, thrivers usually made statements which communicated that their shared parenting relationship was positive and beneficial, while copers made statements indicating the relationship was adequate or tolerable, and strugglers made statements indicating the relationship was negative and flawed. Carrie and Bob, members of a thriver couple who share parenting of Bob's 8-year-old daughter with his former partner Louise, describe the kind of relationship they have with her.

[Carrie]: It's very friendly. She's met my whole family and we know her whole family. It's fine. [Bob]: She wasn't just... I have known her since high school. It's not, the relationship is based on that. It's not, uh, I wouldn't call it a relationship that is not intimate. It is. We know each other well. [Carrie] She is the type of person that if we lived in the same city, we would, in a different situation, we probably would be friends with her. We would hang out with her. She is a very nice person.

For Carrie and Bob the shared parenting relationship is friendly and intimate. Leslie, the biomother of two teenaged boys, describes the shared parenting relationship with the boys' biofather in similar terms.

We are kind of close. We talk a lot. It is kind of, um, we were good friends. We are divorced though, but we were good friends at one time. So, we had a kind of really close relationship. Uh, I try to remain... I like to have that type of relationship. I just... I was kind of raised that way myself, so I'm kind of used to a relationship like that.

For both of these thriver couples the shared parenting relationship is considered to be close or intimate and friendly. They describe the relationship using positive terms. Stepcouples who were considered copers usually described the relationship in more neutral or ambivalent terms. Laurie, a member of a coper couple and the biomother of a 17-year-old girl, describes the shared parenting relationship with her daughter's biofather this way.

Um, it's okay, you know. We never agreed on parenting issues to begin with which was one of the problems in our marriage, so it's kind of, we do the best we can. She lives equal time and we share all of her expenses equally. And we pretty much agree on most parenting issues, um. But, yeah, it gets strained sometimes, sometimes over money, sometimes over, you know, what I'm willing to let her do versus what he is.

This shared parenting relationship for a coper couple is simply "okay." There is some agreement and some strain, but it is generally neither really good, nor really bad. Elaine, also a member of a coper couple and a biomother of a 3-year-old girl describes her relationship with her daughter's biofather in the same manner. The biofather had not participated in raising their daughter for several years and then came back into the picture recently. Elaine says of the shared parenting relationship, "It's okay now. I mean, we're getting along a little bit better, and I've allowed him to make some decisions regarding her. I think that was probably the toughest part." Elaine describes the shared parenting relationship as "okay" and that getting used to sharing decisions after being a single parent for so long was the challenge for her, not the relationship itself. Strugglers, on the other hand often describe the shared parenting as a challenge to manage. Blair and Trevor, members of a struggler couple who share parenting of Trevor's three children

aged 5, 10, and 12, describe their relationship with Trevor's former partner and her husband.

[Trevor]: It's pretty, well, to be quite honest with you, it's very rocky. There's a lot of...there's a lot of bitterness there. There's, I mean, on both sides, um, there's um I just, you know, I can't really think of anybody else in this world that I dislike more. I'll just put it to you that way. [Blair]: It's extremely; it's...a very negative relationship, for all four of the adults. We've all had words. We've all, you know, even a couple weeks ago, we had the most awful email wars where it was just anything goes kind of thing.

Blair and Trevor describe their relationship using the terms "rocky," "bitter," "negative," and "awful." Blair actually describes some of the shared parenting communication as a "war." Another struggler couple, Erin and Bill, who share parenting of Erin's two children aged 14 and 12, share a similar view of their shared parenting relationship.

[Erin]: [It's] horrible. We have kind of a roller coaster relationship where we – he's very "sue happy." He likes to do things he knows are going to piss me off. Um, he's a control freak. He likes to sue me. Um, we'll go through a year where we're getting along, everything's fine, you know, he invites us to come over and play a poker game, everything's fine, everything's great, and then out of the blue, he's like, "Yeah, I'm suing you." It's not good. No, it's not good, on the kids, not, and Bill hates him. [Bill]: I would just rather not have anything to do with him.

Erin and Bill's shared parenting relationship with the other household is unpredictable and described as a "roller coaster." The children's biofather is viewed as behaving in ways that will be upsetting to the couple. In general, the relationship is "not good." Strugglers tend to describe the relationship with negative and challenging terms and experiences, while copers use more neutral terms and experiences, and thrivers' descriptive terms tend to be positive and describe friendly experiences with the shared parenting participants.

### *Narrative Dimensions*

The types of stories the couples told about their relationships with the people with whom they shared parenting revealed what it means to them and how they make sense of this as an aspect of their lives. While all couples shared negative and positive experiences with shared parenting, the types of stories they told about the shared parenting relationship itself tended to differ in terms of its meaning for them. Thrivers' narratives often emphasized the positive and beneficial aspect of the relationship. For example, Carrie, a member of the thriver couple mentioned in the last section tells a story which describes how the shared parenting interactions impact her and her husband.

Louise and I have had some fairly lengthy conversations about things like when certain discussions should take place with Elizabeth. For instance, Elizabeth asks me a lot of questions about sex and I generally answer Elizabeth. But, I mention it to Louise that she and I have had this conversation. And I will tell her specifically what I told Elizabeth and we sort of go back and forth about what else she needs to know and what we think is appropriate. And it is pretty mutually beneficial, I think.

Carrie's description of her experience with shared parenting is a positive experience of regard. She and her stepdaughter's biomother share mutual regard for each others' parenting of the child. The shared parenting experience is "mutually beneficial." A narrative which describes the typical kind of shared parenting experience for another thriver couple, Leslie and Jack, communicates similar mutually beneficial outcomes. Leslie explains.

Okay, my oldest son attends um, therapy. When he first started to begin therapy um, Neal [biofather] did take out of his time to attend our therapy sessions. You know me, him, and my son...So, Neal stepped up with that. And that was a positive experience I think. I think it was significant.

Leslie's narrative demonstrates that the shared parenting is positive as well. This is narrative which demonstrates facilitation on the facilitation-interference dimension. The biofather helps facilitate the child's well-being by attending his therapy sessions with the biomother and their child.

While copers' narratives about the relationship are often not overly positive, they tend to minimize the negative experiences. Laurie, the biomother coper discussed earlier, had an experience where the biofather bought the daughter a horse and expected her and her husband to share the costs.

Yeah, we've fought about that for a while, but, you know, other than that, he really doesn't impact us. I mean, our biggest disagreement, or because we have agreed to share all of her expenses equally, and to the extent he does something, you know without talking to us about it, that I view as extravagant, and then he wants us to share the costs; that to me has really been the only thing that has ever come up in all of these years.

This narrative that Laurie tells about sharing parenting with her daughter's biofather reflects the narrative thematic dimension of either disregard for parenting role, or duplicity for a broken agreement. However, when placing the experience along one of the dimensions it is not an extreme negative for this coper in terms of the scope of their relationship. It is "the only thing which has ever come up in all these years." Elaine, another biomother coper discussed earlier, describes a similar experience which is not unduly negative.

I think one time like a negative experience would be, when I once picked her up and they were eating dinner, and she kept getting up from the table and walking around. And he didn't say anything to her about staying in her seat and finishing her, finishing eating.

Elaine's example of a negative experience when sharing parenting involves different parenting styles and facilitating discipline across households. This narrative about shared

parenting could be seen as lack of facilitation of the rules for discipline she has in her household. There is no comment on how this experience impacts her. On the scale from facilitation to interference, it is not positive, neither is it wholly negative. This is simply something with which she copes.

Strugglers, on the other hand, tend to share stories with extremes on the negative side of the dichotomous thematic dimensions. Blair, a stepmother and a member of a struggler couple described earlier, tells a story about fighting for legal custody of her husband's children which resulted in the parents in the other household creating parental alienation syndrome. They saw a change in the children's behavior toward them.

And when they became distant, and disrespectful, and things, you know, things got ugly between us [Blair and her husband Trevor]. We, at that point, had already dropped a few dimes, and you know, we...we were extremely hurt, extremely, extremely hurt. And we felt betrayed. And so, at that point we backed off of the custody thing. We were like...well they don't want to be here anyway. And after all of the court issues were wrapped up, we dropped the custody part of it because like I said, we were just devastated. And it took such an emotional toll on us, our marriage was really rocky at that point um...because of the stress of all legal issues. It was really bad.

Blair's story of sharing parenting falls on the extreme negative pole of the decency-duplicity dimension and perhaps the facilitation-interference dimension. Parental alienation involves one set of parents creating negative views of the other parents in the children's eyes. So, this communicates both interference and duplicity, as it is often false information the children are given. The extent of the negativity can be seen in the descriptions of how the experience impacted the couple. They were "extremely hurt," felt "betrayed," "devastated" and it took an "emotional toll" on them. Bill, a stepfather struggler described earlier, shares a story about some typical behavior of his stepchildren's biofather.

Yeah, he puts them in – of all the other things that he likes to do – is put them in programs that are scheduled for practices on the nights that we're supposed to have them, so that we can't get them. And they go, like, we're supposed to have them every Thursday and coincidentally, the football league that he just put Alec in, it practices every Thursday. So, he does these very underhanded, sneaky, little jabs.

Bill's experience is an example of a narrative on the negative pole of the facilitation-interference dimension, where the parent with whom the couple shares parenting deliberately obstructs their time with the children. Bill implies that this is just one of the types of "very underhanded, sneaky, little jabs" which he and his wife must endure.

### *Interaction Satisfaction*

In their telling of their shared parenting stories, couples indicated the degree to which they were satisfied with their interactions across households, as well as what they would like to see change in those interactions. Thrivers tended to give high scores on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the most satisfied. They also often identified no changes desired in the interactions or logistical types of changes. For example, Carrie and Bob, a thriver couple identified earlier, give their interactions with Louise a high satisfaction score and indicate timeliness in response as something they would like to have change in the interactions.

[Bob]: Um, 8. [Carrie]: I would say 7 or 8.... Um, she tends to, when she doesn't want to deal with an issue, just kind of not call you back on it occasionally. For instance with the summer schedule right now, everything is kind of up in the air and she is upset about it. She just hasn't called for two days. She'll just kind of put it off until we hunt her down about it. I am not in love with that.

The inconvenience of not getting an immediate response on a schedule issue is a logistical aspect of the interactions that Carrie is "not in love with." This change desired

is not related to the quality of the interactions. Leslie and Jack, another thriver couple identified earlier, also give their interactions a high satisfaction score.

[Leslie]: I'm satisfied. I'll say an 8...because we can be cordial to one another, I can pick up the phone and say, you know, Scott is having a problem in school, you know, could you talk to him. Could you come over here or...And that is okay, so I'm satisfied with that.[Jack] Um, I guess it would be a 10 because I mean like I said we are just cool...Mine is cool. Everything is cool; you know...No change... [Leslie]: Okay, um, I would like um, all of us to be able to vacation together. Do things with the children together as a family. I would like that.

Leslie and Jack are both very satisfied with the interactions and cannot really identify anything they would like to see change. Leslie indicates that she would like the members of the two households to go on vacation together, suggesting that she would like the relationship to be even more intimate. However, no change in the quality of the shared parenting interactions was indicated by either of them.

Copers tended to give lower interaction satisfaction scores. They often desired logistical changes in the interactions and sometimes indicated they desired changes in the interactional quality. Laurie, a member of a coper couple described earlier, explains that she is fairly satisfied because the interactions are functional.

[Laurie]: I'd say I'm satisfied with that....maybe an 8 because it's as good as I want it to get. I mean, it's all I need. [Todd]: With him you know, probably we're just like a 7 or 8, because to me, you know, it functions. And, we do the best for Cori [the shared daughter]. [Laurie]: I'd like them to be done. It will be as soon as she gets through college, other than weddings and stuff. Seriously, I mean, I would be perfectly happy if when they're completely, at, whenever I never have to interact again, honestly...I mean, I'd want them to be, for him to be a little more comfortable with them and relaxed...I mean, definitely. If we had to interact, you know, if they were a little bit easier it'd be better, but ideally just don't interact.

Laurie and Todd indicate that they are fairly satisfied with the interactions because it functions and it is as good as they want it to be. Laurie would like for her daughter's

biofather to be more relaxed in the interactions, but ideally she would like them to cease altogether. These comments do not communicate high satisfaction such as the thrivers share, nor are they the strongly dissatisfied statements of strugglers which will be discussed later in this section. Another member of a coper couple, Elaine, gives similar ambivalent scores and comments about her satisfaction with her shared parenting interactions.

Um, I would say a six. It's kind of, kind of a hassle for me to drive right to Ohio every weekend, but that's about it...Uh, I'd just wish he'd talk a little faster, so that I can get out of there quicker.

Elaine's shared parenting interaction satisfaction is more moderate than the thriver couples, and she indicates more logistical and practical issues as the things she'd like to change in the interactions. She also appears to be relatively ambivalent about the shared parenting interactions she has with her daughter's biofather.

Strugglers often gave low scores to the interaction satisfaction and usually indicated it was the quality of the shared parenting interactions which they would most like to change. For example, Blair and Trevor, a struggler couple described earlier, give the lowest possible score for their interactions across households.

[Blair]: Well, it's gonna have to be a one, because basically there is a lack of open communication...[Trevor]: And a lack of cooperation...[Blair]: I mean, everything ...[Trevor]: Every aspect...[Blair]: Every communication, every issue that we have to deal with her, is negative....[Trevor]: I'd like more of a give and take relationship.

This struggler couple explains that it is the quality of the interactions which they would like to change. There is not enough openness or cooperation. Every interaction is negative, and there is no "give and take." Strugglers Erin and Bill, introduced earlier in

this section, share similar views of their interactions with Erin's children's biofather. The give the lowest satisfaction score possible for the shared parenting interactions.

[Bill]: Zero. [Erin]: One, zero, yeah...A tombstone would be great [laughs].

[Bill]: Just civility, really. [Erin]: A lethal injection or something [laughs],

um...[Bill]: Civility. [Erin]: Civility, and common sense, and... [Bill] Lack of

greed. [Erin]: Lack of greed and completely, you know, the lack of being

completely self absorbed. I mean, realizing that this is not just about him. This is

about them [the children] and what they want. And what's good for them.

Bill and Erin give a low score for the satisfaction in the interactions because the interactions lack civility, and they believe the children's biofather has selfish motivations in the interactions. Erin's jokes about the wish for his demise highlights the negativity of their interactions and her dissatisfaction with them. These descriptions of the interactional satisfaction are neither positive, nor neutral like the thriver and copers experiences, respectively. Interacting across households is a negative experience which offers little with which to be satisfied.

Quantitative analysis of interaction satisfaction scores confirms some of these differences for the stepcouple types. A one-way ANOVA was used to test for shared parenting interaction satisfaction differences among strugglers, copers and thrivers. Interaction satisfaction differed significantly across the three types,  $F(2,29) = 14.34, p = .000$ . Scheffe post-hoc comparisons of the three types indicate that strugglers' interaction satisfaction scores ( $M = 3.70, SD = 2.58$ ) are significantly lower compared to copers ( $M = 7.40, SD = 1.82$ ) and thrivers ( $M = 8.60, SD = 1.47$ )  $p = .001$ , for both comparisons. A comparison between copers and thrivers ( $M = 8.6, SD = 1.47$ ) was not statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

### *Frequency of Interactions*

The final factor which differentiates the three types involves the frequency of interactions across households. Strugglers tended to communicate the least frequently, while thrivers communicated the most frequently. Examples of thrivers' estimates of the frequency of communication across households include Leslie and Jack's at five times per week.

[Leslie]: Very often...Three or four times a week... [Jack]: Three or four times a day. [Leslie]: Oh, God, I'm just...[Jack]: And it's more than that....Oh, yeah. [laughs].. [Leslie]: That is funny. Okay, maybe five times a week.

Carrie and Bob, who live in a different state than Bob's daughter's biomother, communicate an average of four times per week with her.

[Carrie]: Um, email, there is a lot of email probably. [Bob]: On the phone, I talk to her at work a fair amount. [Carrie]: She flies back and forth every other weekend, so at the very least we talk to Louise twice a weekend when she flies out here and when she returns. And she is a talker, so you don't get off the phone with her in less than 45 minutes. And then there is also email, at least once a week or so.

Copers tend to have less frequent communication across households. Laurie estimates that she communicates approximately two and one half times per week with her daughter's biofather.

I'm difficult to reach because I'm always on the go. So we both, mostly by email, um, 2 or 3 times a week. Used to be by phone and still some by phone, but it's just easier by email to me.

Elaine, whose daughter visits her out of state biofather every weekend, also communicates twice per week. She says "I usually talk when I drop her off...and when I drop her off, and then when I pick her up." Strugglers such as Erin and Bill, who

indicated on the questionnaire that they communicate twice per month with Erin's children's biofather, tend to communicate infrequently across households.

I do most of the communicating, when and if he will take my phone calls. He does the whole "tell your mom I'm on the other phone," "tell your mom I'm busy," "tell her I'm on the computer," "tell her I'm out working." If he decides to communicate it's via e-mail and it's demanding money.

Similarly, Blair and Trevor, the struggler couple introduced earlier in this section, indicate that they communicate only three times per month with Trevor's children's biomother.

A one-way ANOVA was used to test for differences in the frequency of interactions among strugglers, copers, and thrivers. The frequency of interactions differed significantly across the three types,  $F(2,29) = 12.42, p = .000$ . Scheffe post-hoc comparisons of the three types indicate that strugglers ( $M = 5.13, SD = 3.67$ ) had significantly fewer interactions across households than thrivers ( $M = 18.6, SD = 9.04$ ),  $p = .000$ , and copers ( $M = 10.65, SD = 5.03$ ),  $p = .040$ . Copers had significantly fewer interactions than thrivers,  $p = .027$ . Table 5 summarizes the features of the Meaning as Impact Typology. The next section discusses the second aspect of meaning which emerged in the narratives.

Table 5

*Typology Features of the Impact of Shared Parenting*

|                                 | Strugglers                                  | Copers                                       | Thrivers                                       |
|---------------------------------|---|--|--|
| <i>Direct Definition</i>        | Negative, destructive                       | Neutral, ambivalent                          | Positive, Beneficial                           |
| <i>Story Dimensions</i>         | Extreme negative poles, loaded language     | Mid-poles, minimize negative                 | Extreme positive poles, loaded language        |
| <i>Interaction Satisfaction</i> | Report low, dysfunctional<br>$M = 3.43$     | Report mid-high, functional<br>$M = 7.26^S$  | Report high, constructive<br>$M = 9.00^S$      |
| <i>Interaction Frequency</i>    | Report infrequent,<br>$M = 5.13/\text{mo.}$ | Report moderate,<br>$M = 10.65/\text{mo.}^S$ | Report frequent,<br>$M = 18.6/\text{mo.}^{SC}$ |

Note: The letter "S" indicates the significant differences between strugglers and the other indicated types. The letter "C" indicates the significant differences between copers and the other indicated types.

*Typology of Shared Parenting: Meaning as Inclusive or Exclusive*

In the telling of their experiences, the stepcouples, whether thrivers, copers or strugglers, revealed they had either a united approach to shared parenting across households or a divided approach. In other words, the couples made sense of this experience as either something that was shared as they were in it together, or not shared and reserved for only one to manage. There were four factors which identified the stepcouples as either united ( $n = 21$ ) or divided ( $n = 11$ ): 1) the degree to which the couples shared decisions about shared parenting, 2) the type of communication engaged in across households, 3) direct definition in the form of explicit statements made about

how involved each member of the couple was in shared parenting communication, and 4) the discursive practices engaged in when telling the shared parenting stories (i.e., the level of we-ness utilized).

### *Shared Decisions*

When asked to discuss their level of decision-making power with regard to sharing parenting across households, individuals scored themselves and each other on a scale of 1-10. Couples who were united in their shared parenting tended to explain in their narratives that they had little difference in their decision-making power. For example, Lenore and Mike, who gave himself a score of 10, express that they share equally in decision-making power. Lenore, who is a stepmother to Mike's four children, gives herself the same score and then explains their approach to decision making.

I would say, 10, because, I mean, I will bring things to Mike's attention that I think need to be managed or handled a certain way. And he will bring things to my attention that bother him. And then we'll both together figure out how we're going to deal with it. And then we usually do. [Mike]: Right. I mean we're very, very balanced and me being the father and Lenore being the stepmother – very balanced, equally.

Mike and Lenore's answer to the question about decision making reveal no difference in their levels of influence. In fact, they go on to describe how their power is "very balanced, equally" and something they approach "together." They are both included in shared parenting decisions. Josh is the stepfather to his wife, Gretchen's, 10 year-old boy. While Gretchen gives herself and Josh both a score of ten on decision-making influence, Josh gives himself a score of nine.

[Josh]: Uh, I would say probably a nine or ten. There's just a little bit more stuff that Gretchen does than I do, just because of the fact that I may be at work. According to, if a lot of meetings come up, and stuff like that, so... [Gretchen]: We always discuss it, together.

Again, this couple expresses little difference in decision-making power. Also, Gretchen expresses that all decisions are discussed "together." This couple expresses inclusion in decision making based on their scores and descriptions of how shared parenting decision making takes place.

Stepcouples who were in the divided category often indicated large differences in shared parenting decision-making power. The stepparents often gave themselves much lower scores than the bioparents. For example, Audrey, a stepmother to her partner's 7-year-old girl, believes she has no decision-making power compared to her husband. Her husband gave himself a score of five, and when asked how much decision-making power she has, she responded "As little as possible...What I say no one really cares [laughs]. I may say things but no one cares. So, I've stopped expressing my preference...If zero would be none, then it would be that." Audrey not only gives herself the lowest score possible on decision-making power, but also provides a revealing statement on her exclusion from shared parenting. She believes that "no one really cares" about her preferences.

Another example of differences in decision-making power within stepcouples is provided by Scott, who is a stepfather to his wife, Allison's 17-year-old son. He also ranks himself much lower on decision-making power than does his wife who gave herself a score of ten.

Um, not much, I think, um, I just kind of stay in the background. So, you know. I'd say probably, three, if not – I mean, well, maybe even a little higher than that... Or, whatever, but maybe about a five then.

Similar to Audrey, Scott not only ranks himself significantly lower than his spouse, but he also provides a statement about his exclusion when he states that he stays "in the background."

The narratives about decision-making influence provided insight into the differences in levels of inclusion and exclusion with regard to shared parenting communication. Couples who were divided had communicated greater differences in their decision-making influence through their accounts and/or their scores than couples who were united. There were also statistically significant differences between the two groups for the differences in the partners' scores on decision-making influence  $t(30) = 6.27, p = .000$ ). Couples who were united in shared parenting often indicated self-scores which were close in range, within three points ( $M = 1.24, SD = 1.31$ ). Couples who were divided usually had scores with a wider range and were almost always more than 4 points in difference ( $M = 4.91, SD = 1.70$ ). Prior to conducting the t-test, in order to confirm independence in an analysis of these types, a test of equality of variances was performed using Kenny, Kashy, and Cook's (2006) modification for reciprocal standard dyad designs.

*Communication approaches.* Stepcouples whose accounts of shared parenting indicated they were the united type also tended to use more collaborative approaches when communicating across households. They tended to use conferred or consultative stepcouple shared parenting communication. Angela, the stepmother to her husband, Brad's two children aged 12 and 7, describes how they devise a plan for communicating to the children's biomother, "Oh yeah, Brad and I consult. We come up with a plan and then he has to break it to her." In this statement about communicating across households,

Angela indicates that they are both included in the formulation of the message content.

Similarly, Lenore describes how she and Mike compose email messages to his children's biomother in order to accomplish their shared parenting goals.

We talk about you know how we're going to put it to her in an email...Oh, let's see. Well, like if we're going somewhere, you know, we talk about what we are going to let her know, and what we are not going to let her know, because she has a tendency to criticize anything.

Lenore and Mike compose the shared parenting communication together. They are both included in the composition of the message across households. Often, couples who are inclusive in the shared parenting communication, when asked about it, respond with simple, affirmative statements. For example some of the responses included, "Yeah" [in unison], "I don't think you shouldn't," "Sure," and "Absolutely!" These couples affirm that they are both included in the shared parenting communication across households, thus indicating they are united in shared parenting.

Couples whose narratives indicated they were the divided type tended not to make it a habit of collaborating on communication across households. They tended to mainly use the non-consultative approach. With these couples, the bioparent tended to handle all or most of the communication, taking the non-consultative approach. For example, Cameron, a stepfather to his wife Yvette's two boys, aged 12 and 10, and biofather to two boys aged 13 and 11, describes how it is rare that he includes his wife in shared parenting communication.

The thing that comes to my mind, and it's been pretty rare, is like, you know, we've taken them on vacations. And there, you know, it's not too complicated. It's more just a need to, to somehow confirm this, you know. We need to let her know or, give her word. I wouldn't say it was anything we had to discuss or strategize or you know, agree on. It was just more. . . 'cause I don't think in that regard there's

been any need to really think about it. [Yvette]: I mean, really, Cameron knows better than I do.

In this description of the agency of communication across households, the stepparent is not included in the shared parenting communication because there is no "need" to, and because the bioparent "knows better" how to handle the communication. Elaine, the biomother of a 3-year-old girl from a previous relationship and an 8-month-old in her current one with Stan, the stepfather to her daughter, says of communication across households "I usually just take care of it on my own." Divided couples tend to limit the agency in communication across households to either be solely managed by the bioparent or on some occasions consulting the stepparent. Often the stepparent is excluded from the communication composition and delivery across households.

#### *Direct Definition*

Stepcouples who were united and divided in shared parenting made explicit statements which directly define shared parenting was an inclusive situation for them or an exclusive one. There tended to be statements of togetherness for united couples and separateness for divided couples. United couples tended to make explicit statements which indicated that shared parenting was something they experienced together, while divided couples made explicit statements indicating that this was something experienced and handled mainly by the bioparent. The following are examples of the kinds of explicit statements of inclusiveness in shared parenting that united couples made.

#### United Stepcouple Statements of Inclusion

Biofather: I mean we're very, very balanced and me being the father and Lenore being the stepmother – very balanced, equally.

Biomother: We always discuss it, together.

Stepmother: We'll both, together, figure out how we're going to deal with it. And then we usually do.

Biofather: And, we really feel like we're their main parents and that, you know...This is their home, and this is where they'll grow up, this is where they go to school, so it should be us first, at least, you know?

Biomother: We usually talk things over before I decide on anything. So, I mean maybe not on their part, they wouldn't think it was him, but we usually come to an agreement together.

Stepcouples who were divided tended to make statements which revealed that the stepparent did not participate in the shared parenting activities or that the bioparent took control and exclusively managed them. The following are examples of the kinds of explicit statements of exclusiveness in shared parenting that members of divided couples made.

#### Divided Step couple Statements of Exclusion

Stepmother: What I say no one really cares [laughs]. I may say things but no one cares. So, I've stopped expressing my preference.

Stepfather: I just kind of stay in the background.

Biomother: Cara is my responsibility and that was totally up to me.

Biomother: Yeah, I usually just take care of it on my own.

Stepfather: She usually does her thing and if she needs support, I give it to her, but usually she has a better idea of how to handle him and what to say.

Biomother: You know, I do 100 percent of the parenting here...But I just, every – I do not consider Bobby, any part of Bobby, to be Chuck's responsibility.

Stepfather: I couldn't really answer that question, because when they talk about the kids, and as far as what they are doing, you know, I'm really not involved in that part.

The united and divided couples tended to differ greatly in statements made about who was or was not included in the shared parenting. Divided couples communicated separateness, while united couples communicated togetherness in the kinds of statements they made about who was included in shared parenting. United couples made more inclusive statements, while divided couples communicated exclusivity.

### *We-ness*

Finally, the two types of stepcouples tended to differ in the level of we-ness that was used to describe their shared parenting experiences. We-ness involves employing joint versus individual storytelling, and using "we" or "us," more than "he," "she" or "I" in the narratives, and this differed between the two groups. In using the above examples of explicit statements about the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of the participation in shared parenting, the couples also demonstrated the presence of lack of togetherness by their use of pronouns. The statements for united and divided stepcouples follow again here, but with the pronouns bolded to highlight these differences in we-ness.

#### United Stepcoouples' Pronoun Usage

I mean **we're** very, very balanced and me being the father and Lenore being the stepmother – very balanced, equally.

**We** always discuss it, together.

**We'll** both, together, figure out how **we're** going to deal with it. And then **we** usually do.

And **we** really feel like **we're** their main parents and that, you know... This is their home, and this is where they'll grow up, this is where they go to school, so it should be **us** first at least, you know?

**We** usually talk things over before **I** decide on anything. So, I mean maybe not on their part, they wouldn't think it was **him**, but **we** usually come to an agreement together.

For the most part, these united stepcouple members use inclusive pronouns when discussing shared parenting. With the exception of the "I mean" conversation fillers, there were very few pronouns used which did not indicate togetherness. This is in sharp contrast to the separateness-indicating pronouns used by the divided stepcouples.

#### Divided Stepouples Pronoun Usage

What **I** say no one really cares [laughs]. **I** may say things but no one cares. So, **I've** stopped expressing my preference

**I** just kind of stay in the background.

Cara is **my** responsibility and that was totally up to **me**.

Yeah, **I** usually just take care of it on **my** own

**She** usually does **her** thing and if **she** needs support, **I** give it to her, but usually **she** has a better idea of how to handle him and what to say.

You know, **I** do 100 percent of the parenting here...But **I** just, every – **I** do not consider Bobby, any part of Bobby, to be Chuck's responsibility.

**I** couldn't really answer that question, because when **they** talk about the kids, and as far as what **they** are doing, you know, **I'm** really not involved in that part.

In contrast to the pronouns used in the united stepcouples statements, the divided stepcouples' statements above contained no usage of "we," or "us." In the last statement above, the biofather even referred to the bioparents, his wife and her husband as "them," distancing him from the two bioparents, while indicating the bioparents were doing the shared parenting together. Table 6 summarizes the features of the Meaning as Inclusive of Exclusive Typology.

Table 6

*Typology Features of the Degree of Inclusiveness in Shared Parenting*

|                               | United   | Divided   |
|-------------------------------|--|---|
| <i>Decision Participation</i> | Share equally in most decisions; little difference in influence on decisions<br>$M = 1.24^*$ | Most decisions reserved for bioparent; greater difference in influence on decisions<br>$M = 4.91^*$ |
| <i>Communication Typology</i> | Often coactive, conferred, and consultative  | Often non-consultative  |
| <i>Direct Definition</i>      | Shared parenting is conducted together   | Shared parenting is mainly reserved for the bioparent   |
| <i>Discursive Practices</i>   | Use <i>we</i> and <i>us</i> more than <i>me</i> and <i>I</i>                                 | Use <i>me</i> and <i>I</i> more than <i>we</i> and <i>us</i>  |

Note: The asterisk symbol indicates statistically significant differences.

Several features of the stepcouples' narratives contributed to the identification of them as united or divided in shared parenting. The degree to which the couples shared decisions about shared parenting, the inclusive or exclusive nature of communication engaged in across households, explicit statements made about the degree to which both were involved in shared parenting communication, as well as the discursive practices engaged in when telling the stories, displayed in pronoun usage, were indicators of either united or divided couples. It is important to note that not every couple who was categorized as a particular type, whether struggler, copier, thriver, united or divided, always met all four criteria for each couple type within the two typologies. Often they met only three of the criteria, but were assigned to a type based on those, and the whole-

interview narrative analysis. The next section will present the results regarding the shared parenting challenges these stepcouples experience.

### Shared Parenting Challenges: Research Question Three

The third research question sought to identify the areas of challenges that stepcouples experience when sharing parenting with other adults raising the children. These challenges were identified using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative approach identified challenges which emerged in the interviews when the stepcouples told their stories about their experiences with sharing parenting. The quantitative procedures identified challenges using a five-point Likert item that asked the participants to indicate whether certain shared parenting situations presented 1) no challenge, 2) a slight challenge, 3) a moderate challenge, 4) a substantial challenge, or 5) a severe challenge.

#### *Shared Parenting Challenges: Quantitative*

Participants were asked to rate 17 Likert items according to their experienced level of challenge with them. Descriptive statistics were used to identify the mean score for each item. The two items which represent the most common challenges for the respondents include *dealing with financial issues that arise for stepfamilies*, where 90.6% ( $n = 58$ ) of the participants experienced this factor as a slight to severe challenge with a mean score of 3.02 ( $SD = 1.25$ ), and *participating in family events with the extended stepfamily including former and new spouses and their kin* where 85.9% ( $n = 55$ ) experienced this as a slight to severe challenge ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ). The issues which presented the least challenge were *operating as a stepfamily in society* which was experienced as "no challenge" for 50% of the participants ( $n = 32$ ), with a mean of 1.86

( $SD = 1.11$ ). *Ensuring that the stepparent is a legitimate agent in the children's medical environment* was experienced as "no challenge" for 51.6% of the participants ( $n = 22$ ), with a mean of 2.13 ( $SD = 1.42$ ); and 53.1% of the participants ( $n = 34$ ) experienced "no challenge" when *dealing with the positive feeling the children had for the parents in the other household*, with a mean of 1.84 ( $SD = 1.14$ ).

The remaining 14 items represented a challenge of varying degrees for the participants. That is, they were at least a slight challenge. Slight, moderate, substantial and severe percentages were totaled to determine the items with the highest frequency of challenge. The three items which represent the most common challenges for the respondents include *dealing with financial issues that arise for stepfamilies* and 90.6% ( $n = 58$ ) of the participants experienced this factor as a challenge with a mean score of 3.02 ( $SD = 1.25$ ), and *participating in family events with the extended stepfamily including former and new spouses and their kin* where 85.9% ( $n = 55$ ) experienced this as a slight to severe challenge ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ). These item means and standard deviations, as well as the frequency and percent for each item are presented in Table 7.

Table 7

*Descriptive Statistics on Stepcouple Challenges (Scale of 1 = No Challenge to 5 = Severe Challenge)*

|  | No<br>Challenge      | Slight<br>Challenge  | Moderate<br>Challenge | Substantial<br>Challenge | Severe<br>Challenge | Mean | SD   |
|--|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|------|------|
| <i>Participating in or organizing family events in the context of a stepfamily.</i>  | <b>35.9%</b><br>(23) | 31.3%<br>(20)        | 25%<br>(16)           | 17.2%<br>(11)            | 17.2%<br>(11)       | 2.14 | 1.11 |
| <i>Participating in or organizing family events in the context of the extended family (former spouses and their kin, new spouses and their kin).</i> | 14.1%<br>(9)         | 26.6%<br>(17)        | <b>29.7%</b><br>(19)  | 15.6%<br>(10)            | 14.1%<br>(9)        | 2.89 | 1.25 |
| <i>Adapting to the children's schedule for residing with each biological parent.</i>   | 21.9%<br>(14)        | <b>43.8%</b><br>(28) | 20.3%<br>(13)         | 9.4%<br>(6)              | 4.7%<br>(3)         | 2.31 | 1.07 |
| <i>Dealing with legal issues that arise for stepfamilies.</i>  | <b>35.9%</b><br>(23) | 15.6%<br>(10)        | 18.8%<br>(12)         | 12.5%<br>(8)             | 17.2%<br>(11)       | 2.59 | 1.51 |
| <i>Dealing with financial issues that arise for stepfamilies.</i>  | 9.4%<br>(6)          | 31.3%<br>(20)        | <b>25%</b><br>(16)    | 17.2%<br>(11)            | 17.2%<br>(11)       | 3.02 | 1.25 |
| <i>Operating as a stepfamily in society.</i>   | <b>50%</b><br>(32)   | 28.1%<br>(18)        | 12.5%<br>(8)          | 4.7%<br>(3)              | 4.7%<br>(3)         | 1.86 | 1.11 |
| <i>Accepting a different kind of life as a couple than I had imagined.</i>   | 28.1%<br>(18)        | <b>37.5%</b><br>(24) | 15.6%<br>(10)         | 17.2%<br>(11)            | 1.6%<br>(1)         | 2.27 | 1.10 |
| <i>Managing money in the context of a stepfamily.</i>  | 21.9%<br>(14)        | <b>29.7%</b><br>(19) | 25%<br>(16)           | 17.2%<br>(11)            | 6.3%<br>(4)         | 2.56 | 1.19 |
| <i>Ensuring that the stepparent (you or your spouse) is viewed as a legitimate agent in the children's school environment.</i>                       | <b>48.4%</b><br>(31) | 21.9%<br>(14)        | 9.4%<br>(6)           | 9.4%<br>(6)              | 10.9%<br>(7)        | 2.13 | 1.40 |

|   | No<br>Challenge      | Slight<br>Challenge  | Moderate<br>Challenge | Substantial<br>Challenge | Severe<br>Challenge | Mean | SD   |
|---|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|------|------|
| <i>Ensuring that the stepparent (you or your spouse) is viewed as a legitimate agent in the children's medical environment.</i> | <b>51.6%</b><br>(22) | 15.6%<br>(10)        | 12.5%<br>(8)          | 9.4%<br>(6)              | 10.9%<br>(7)        | 2.13 | 1.42 |
| <i>Ensuring that the stepparent's role in the stepfamily is clear.</i>  | 29.7%<br>(19)        | <b>32.8%</b><br>(21) | 18.8%<br>(12)         | 9.4%<br>(6)              | 9.4%<br>(6)         | 2.36 | 1.26 |
| <i>Dealing with the presence of my or my spouse's former partner in my current family life.</i>                                 | <b>32.8%</b><br>(21) | 25%<br>(16)          | 7.8%<br>(5)           | 15.6%<br>(10)            | 18.8%<br>(12)       | 2.63 | 1.54 |
| <i>Dealing with sharing decisions (that affect me and my stepfamily) with my or my spouse's former partner.</i>                 | 21.9%<br>(14)        | <b>28.1%</b><br>(18) | 14.1%<br>(9)          | 18.8%<br>(12)            | 17.2%<br>(11)       | 2.81 | 1.42 |
| <i>Dealing with discipline of children in the stepfamily.</i>   | 26.6%<br>(17)        | 21.9%<br>(14)        | <b>28.1%</b><br>(18)  | 9.4%<br>(6)              | 14.1%<br>(9)        | 2.63 | 1.35 |
| <i>Respecting the positive feelings the children have for the parent(s) in the other household.</i>                             | <b>53.1%</b><br>(34) | 25%<br>(16)          | 10.9%<br>(7)          | 6.3%<br>(4)              | 4.7%<br>(3)         | 1.84 | 1.14 |
| <i>Dealing with the negative feelings the children have for the parent(s) in the other household.</i>                           | <b>46.9%</b><br>(30) | 26.6%<br>(17)        | 15.6%<br>(10)         | 9.4%<br>(6)              | 1.6%<br>(1)         | 1.92 | 1.07 |
| <i>Accepting that my family is different from that which I had imagined.</i>  | <b>40.6%</b><br>(26) | 31.3%<br>(20)        | 15.6%<br>(10)         | 6.3%<br>(4)              | 6.3%<br>(4)         | 2.06 | 1.18 |

Note: This table presents descriptive statistics of degree of challenge experienced by item. Bolded figures represent the response with the highest frequency. N = 64.

When asked to identify up to five shared parenting factors which the participants most wanted to change, *dealing with discipline* was the most frequently listed at 10.8 % ( $n = 29$ ), *dealing with financial issues* was 9.7% ( $n = 26$ ), and *sharing decisions with former partners or spouse's former partners* was 8.9% ( $n = 24$ ). The least frequently listed items the participants desired to change were *operating as a stepfamily in society* at 1.5% ( $n = 4$ ), and *dealing with the positive feelings of the children* at 2.2% ( $n = 6$ ).

#### *Shared Parenting Challenges: Qualitative*

There were a total of 15 areas of challenge which emerged in exploratory analysis of the narratives that the stepcouples told about their experiences sharing parenting. The challenges identified included issues with 1) financial matters, 2) legal procedures, 3) conflict, 4) differing discipline, 5) differing values, 6) differing religions, 7) managing schedules, 8) coordinating exchanges, 9) time apart from the children, 10) poor communication, 11) parental alienation syndrome, 12) agency in the schools, 13) establishing the stepparent role, 14) sharing decisions, and 15) the presence of the former spouse in the stepcouple's lives. Some of the experiences of challenges with shared parenting overlap into more than one category. For example, dealing with legal procedures is also dealing with conflict and for some couples it is also a challenge financially. So, some of the narratives helped to identify multiple challenges that the couples experienced. Also, several of these challenges reflect the dichotomous negative poles of *disregard*, *duplicity*, *interference*, and *inflexibility* on the dichotomous narrative dimensions of shared parenting experiences. The following section contains excerpts from narratives that help explain the challenges which are displayed in Figure 4.

Figure 4

*Shared Parenting Challenges Identified in the Narratives*

|                      |                        |                        |
|----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Financial Matters    | Legal Procedures       | Conflict               |
| Differing Discipline | Coordinating Exchanges | Poor Communication     |
| Managing Schedules   | Agency in Schools      | Differing Religions    |
| Sharing Decisions    | Time Apart             | Stepparent Role        |
| Parental Alienation  | Differing Values       | Presence Former Spouse |

*Financial Issues*

One biofather of four children with ages ranging from 11 to 23, Mike, explains how the financial obligations to his children's biomother place limits on the types of family activities he can engage in with his wife and children.

I mean, I would love to take a vacation with the children and Lenore, but I can't do that because I'm paying her [the biomother] too much support, and too much alimony. And that, right there, has me crippled. And I can't financially do the thing I would like to do with my kids.

Mike is unable to take a vacation with his family due to the financial constraints presented by shared parenting. His limitations on the type of quality time he can spend with his wife and family due to financial issues presented by shared parenting are a challenge for him and his wife.

### *Legal Procedures*

Financial challenges also come into play when stepcouples are involved in legal procedures regarding shared parenting issues. Such legal matters often involve child support and child custody. Audrey, a stepmother to her husband's 7 year-old daughter discusses the lack of reward for such procedures.

The negative experience is definitely the drain that lawyers put on my bank account. It is so expensive. And what do we get in the end? Neither party really gets anything from that. It's not like you get goods or services or anyone's getting rich off of this kind of thing.

For this stepcouple the legal experience is negative, and a drain on their finances. Blair and Trevor, a couple discussed earlier, also found dealing with legal issues to be challenging. Blair indicated they eventually dropped the custody part of the legal action due to "the stress of all the legal issues."

### *Conflict*

When legal action is taken, conflict is implicated. There is a perceived interference with the goals one of the parties has, and the dispute requires adjudicators. However, stepcouples also experience non-adjudicated conflict with the shared parenting participants in the other household. Lenore, a stepmother to her husband's four children describes the constant conflicts they have with the children's biomother.

We're pretty much under her control. She likes to feel like she's having an impact on whatever we want to do...But there's always objections and you know, there's always some criticism or you know something that, something that screws everything up. So that, you know, it's really like you have to come up with a whole new plan. It's a lot of work.

This couple experiences conflict on a regular basis when the biomother interferes with their plans and goals for the children. Felicia, a stepmother to her husband's two boys aged 9 and 11, sees the boy's biomother as an adversary and says, "I would like it to go

from adversarial to neutral. That is really all I can ask for and hopefully we will get there."

### *Differing Discipline*

Often the stepcouples are at odds with the parenting in the other household over differences in discipline for the shared children. They consequently find it a challenge to deal with discipline issues. Lou, a biofather of a 7 year-old girl describes the issue of dealing with discipline across households.

You don't expect to have to have an argument over, you know, whether you're going to sit at a table or not. And then knowing that it's not being reinforced anywhere else, it's just really, it creates a lot of tension overall.

When the shared parenting participant does not enforce the same rules for behavior in the other home then it makes discipline on the stepcouples' homes more challenging. There is lack of regard, facilitation or even deliberate interference with the parenting goals.

### *Differing Values*

Sometimes the values espoused for the children by the stepcouple are not supported in the other home. For example, Tyler, the stepfather to three teenage girls, explains how the girls' biofather does not give them any responsibility when they are in his home. It thus presents a challenge when they return because he and the girls' biomother are the only parents teaching them particular values.

He'll tell you right out, it's more important for him to be their friend, than it is their father. I disagree in the sense that he does so much for them. He does everything for them, basically. He does their laundry, cleans for them, cooks for them, cleans the house after them. There is no responsibility involved. When they get into their own house, and all of a sudden, bam, they have to do laundry, they have to cook, they have to clean up for themselves...

Tyler laments the lack of responsibility being instilled in the children when they are not in his home. This couple experience a challenge with regard to differing values taught to the children in the two shared parenting households. This father's behavior interferes with the parenting goals of the stepcouple.

### *Differing Religions*

Another difference between households which presents a challenge is religion.

Trevor, the biofather of three children does not appreciate the religion being taught to the children in the other home.

Well, I mean that too brings out the whole religious war that we're, you know, embroiled in. There's just so many elements. It's just so ugly. I mean, first, we're a different religion, and their religion being one that anyone that is not their religion is not worthy. So, that is a whole other topic that totally plays into this because their religion basically teaches them since their God isn't that religion that he is of a lower stature than they are. And everyone in his family is of a lower stature.

The differences in religions across households create an "ugly" experience for this stepcouple. Since his children are being taught that all other religions are inferior, and he and his wife are of a different religion, then the children are being taught that he and his wife are inferior. He equates the religious differences in the two homes to a "war."

### *Managing Schedules*

Dealing with the children's schedule was an issue for the stepcouples. It presents challenges with regard to scheduling family activities, holidays and completing school work. Blair, the biomother to a 6-year-old girl explains how her daughter's weekend visitations with the biofather were disruptive.

Yeah, and she was gone every weekend. And he felt like he was getting the short end of the stick. And we started getting frustrated because we couldn't plan anything for the family...we couldn't do anything.

With the girl gone every weekend, due to the girl's visitation schedule, the stepcouple had challenges with finding family time together. Another challenge in dealing with the children's schedule involves schooling. Felicia, the biomother of two boys who live in two homes and stepmother to two boys who live in two homes says that due to the children's schedules, "The continuity of schoolwork is tough." Because the children may begin an assignment in one home carrying out the finished project in the other home is a challenge.

#### *Coordinating Exchanges*

Managing the drop-offs and pick-ups was also a challenge for the stepcouples. Getting the children from one home to the other requires coordination with the adults in the other home. Stan, the biofather of a three-year old boy says it is difficult to work around the biomother's schedule in order to meet up with her.

Sometimes we would have to, you know, change our whole plans around in order to kind of, you know, meet with her, you know, her around her schedule times. So, I think that was kind of a challenge and a difficulty.

In order to complete an exchange of the child with the biomother, the stepcouple needed to rearrange their plans, which was often difficult and challenging. Sometimes the shared parenting partners can demonstrate inflexibility with regard to scheduling exchanges.

#### *Time Apart*

Part of shared parenting involves absence of the children from the home. This presented a challenge for couples in terms of activities they would like to plan during this time the children were away, as well as generally missing them when they are gone.

Kyle, a stepfather to two children aged 6 and 7, explains this difficulty.

And I think one thing, it's actually, it's tough on us for a while, because obviously you want to try to spend every—you only see them half the time. You want to spend every waking moment, but then they also, where Lenny lives, they don't have any friends, that I know of. And when they come over here, they want to run and play with their friends. And I want to spend some time with [them] too. So it, that's a tough, that's a tough balance.

This stepfather explains that the time apart from the children is challenging for two reasons. He misses them when they are gone, and then because they are gone, he can't spend time with them when they are home. The children also want to spend time with their friends.

#### *Poor Communication*

Communication across households can be lacking and stepcouples found this to be challenging. Often couples get too little information, or the quality of the interactions is less than desired. Scott, the biofather of four children, explains how the communication with the children's biomother is erratic.

There's not much there, as far as communication. You would think with four kids there would be a lot to talk about. Unfortunately the communication from her end is always when there's an issue or a problem, you know. And then it's, you know, almost the moods. When I'm in the mood to talk to you, I'll talk to you, and I won't shut up, type thing, to I won't even come to the door when you, you know, you want to talk to me, type thing.

Not only is the lack of communication a challenge for this stepcouple, but the biomother usually only communicates when there is a problem to solve, if she communicates at all. Withholding information displays disregard for the parenting roles of the stepcouple.

#### *Parental Alienation Syndrome*

Stepcouples also experienced a challenge in shared parenting when the shared parenting participants communicated negatively about them to the children. This causes

denigration of the stepcouples in the children's eyes. Blair, a stepmother to her husband's three children, describes how parental alienation affected them.

With the children they began their good behavior. And then they went on a mission to turn the kids away from us. And basically things got really bad in our household, um, like around January, February, March of this year... They were awful... They, oh my gosh... because they, we have no idea what was being said, or you know. We, we were extremely hurt, extremely, extremely hurt. And we felt betrayed.

Knowing that the children's views of them were being tainted was a very difficult experience for this stepcouple. It is challenging to deal with the children who were being given false and negative information about them. They didn't know what was being said in order to combat it. Parental alienation demonstrates disregard for the parenting role, duplicity, and interference in the parent-child relationship.

#### *Agency in the Schools*

Dealing with school systems when the children have more than one set of parents and more than one home can present difficulties for stepparents and bioparents. The schools are often necessarily protective of the children's school information. Trevor, the biofather of three children, explains how this has been a hurdle for him.

It's been one of my greatest struggles... Every time I've wanted any information at all, I've had to take, you know, my decree and my parenting plan up there to show them that I share equal custody. I understand why they do that, but the way that I've been treated, like a second-class citizen, it's unbelievable.

Even though Trevor shares equal custody, because he shares parenting with another bioparent, he has to undergo additional hurdles just to achieve the same rights and status that other parents enjoy.

### *Establishing the Stepparent Role*

Managing the role of the stepparent can be difficult for stepfamily couples who share parenting. Stepparents' responsibilities vary across households. Whatever role is taken, it must have the support of the spouse and also the respect of the child. Audrey, a stepmother to her husband, Lou's, 7-year-old daughter explains the challenge of her role.

Um, a challenge would be that I don't have control over what happens in my house... Yeah, because, I mean, I can make a rule, but no one listens to it. Lou is not going to listen to rules that I made because we're both adults, but then he doesn't necessarily enforce the rules that I want on his daughter. And she doesn't listen to anything that I say... A mother is able to discipline her kids to actually, they have to listen to their mom. I am just like, below babysitter status. Everything that I said is just like, no one really cares.

Negotiating the stepparent role is very challenging for Audrey because the rules she wants in the home are not supported by her husband, and not followed by her stepdaughter. She compares herself to a biomother who presumably receives this support and respect.

### *Sharing Decisions*

Stepcouples who share parenting are often expected to share decisions made about the children. Because the parents in the two households can have differing views about what's right for the child and for themselves, this decision sharing can be challenging. Ethan, a stepfather of two girls aged 8 and 11, says, "You know, so for example, sometimes I wish that we, just...like, Randal wasn't a factor, like we could just be parents, you know?" To "just be parents" means you don't have a third person interfering with the decisions you make about the children. He or she is a factor which prevents this. Sometimes, the lack of sharing decisions on the part of the shared parenting participants presents a problem for the stepcouples. Scott and Allison, who share

parenting of Scott's four children with the children's biomother, explain how the lack of consultation with decisions is a challenge for them.

[Scott]: Yeah, I think that's negative for us too, you know. The decisions are made and then the decisions communicated. There's never really any discussion before a decision is made. [Allison]: Or, very rarely. I won't say never, but very rarely...[Scott]:...we find out three weeks later that they've been in karate for three weeks, or made a decision to sign them up and put them in there. [Allison]: Or, one of them is taking flute lessons. But, we're never consulted.

In this case, the couple finds the exclusion from decisions, which they believe should be shared, to be a challenge. Such exclusion demonstrates disregard and perhaps duplicity in sharing parenting.

#### *Presence of the Former Spouse*

Dealing with the presence of a shared parenting participant always being involved in their lives is a difficulty noted by stepcouples. Doreen, a biomother of two children aged 6 and 7, explains that this presence of her former spouse in her and her husband Kyle's lives is difficult.

I knew that, that person was going to be affecting my life forever, but you know, Kyle accepted it, but there comes [times] when I think he gets really resentful of it and it comes out in anger. And like when we are trying to solve a problem, the problem doesn't get fixed. It's just "he's [the biofather] always going to be like that" I know he's always going to be like that, what am I going to do?

This stepcouple knows that the biofather will be a part of their lives "forever" but because they can't always resolve issues due to his presence, it creates difficulties for them.

Stepcouples narratives revealed that they experienced challenges in 15 areas of shared parenting: financial, legal, conflict, discipline, values, religion, schedules, exchanges, time apart from the children, poor communication, parental alienation syndrome, agency in the schools, the stepparent role, sharing decisions, and the presence

of the former spouse in the stepcouple's lives. Also, dealing with discipline, financial issues, and sharing decisions with the former partner were identified from the questionnaire as the challenges the stepcouples most wanted to change. The next section presents the results for research question four, which further explores the stepcouples' shared parenting challenges by looking at their relationships to other variables.

### Challenges, Narratives, and Marital Satisfaction:

#### Research Question Four

Research question four was designed to illuminate the relationships between the themes of the shared parenting narratives told by the stepcouples, the challenges they experience, and their marital satisfaction. The narrative themes were coded into categories and assigned to the appropriate couples in order to facilitate the statistical tests required to answer these questions. Three categories of variables were created for the narrative themes which were identified in the data and these included 1) the typology identifying the impact of shared parenting interactions across households for stepcouples: thrivers ( $n = 5$ ), copers ( $n = 13$ ), or strugglers ( $n = 14$ ) in shared parenting; 2) the typology identifying the stepcouple's approach as either united ( $n = 21$ ) or divided ( $n = 11$ ), and 3) the combined typology: united thrivers ( $n = 3$ ), united copers ( $n = 8$ ), united strugglers ( $n = 10$ ), divided thrivers ( $n = 2$ ), divided copers ( $n = 5$ ) and divided strugglers ( $n = 4$ ). Relationships between these narrative theme variables and shared parenting challenges and marital satisfaction were analyzed. As well, the relationship between marital satisfaction and shared parenting challenges were analyzed. The remainder of this section presents the results of the statistical tests for the relationships among these three phenomena.

### *Shared Parenting Narrative Themes and Challenges*

The relationships between the 11 shared parenting narrative themes and the 17 shared parenting challenges from the Likert item were determined using a one-way ANOVA. Strugglers experienced significantly greater challenge than *copers* in five areas, and significantly greater challenge than *thrivers* in two areas. *United strugglers* differed significantly from *united copers* in one area of challenge. A t-test comparing degrees of challenge experienced with shared parenting identified no differences between *united* and *divided* couples.

#### *Strugglers, Copers, and Thrivers*

A one-way ANOVA was used to test relationships between the stepcouple types and the shared parenting challenges mean couples' scores. The degree of challenge for *participating in events with the extended family* differed significantly across struggler, copers and thrivers stepcouples,  $F(2,29) = 3.92, p = .031$ . Scheffe post-hoc comparisons indicate that strugglers ( $M = 3.43, SD = 2.09$ ) experienced this as more challenging than copers ( $M = 2.46, SD = .75$ ),  $p = .046$ . The degree of challenge with *dealing with legal issues* also differed significantly across struggler, copers and thrivers stepcouples,  $F(2,29) = 4.29, p = .023$ . Scheffe post-hoc comparisons indicate that strugglers ( $M = 3.32, SD = 1.44$ ) experienced it as more challenging than copers ( $M = 2.08, SD = 1.06$ ),  $p = .048$ . Also, the degree of challenge with *dealing with financial issues* differed significantly across the three types,  $F(2,29) = 5.28, p = .011$ . Scheffe post-hoc comparisons indicate that strugglers ( $M = 3.61, SD = 1.02$ ) differed from copers ( $M = 2.38, SD = .94$ ),  $p = .011$ . The degree of challenge with *dealing with the presence of a former partner* also differed significantly across the three types,  $F(2,29) = 6.71, p = .004$ . Scheffe post-hoc

comparisons indicate that strugglers ( $M = 3.39, SD = 1.18$ ) experienced this as more of a challenge than copers ( $M = 2.23, SD = 1.18$ ),  $p = .038$ , and more of a challenge than thrivers ( $M = 1.50, SD = .50$ ),  $p = .011$ . The degree of challenge for *dealing with sharing decisions with a former partner* differed significantly across the three types,  $F(2,29) = 8.02, p = .002$ . Scheffe post-hoc comparisons indicate that strugglers ( $M = 3.61, SD = 1.04$ ) experienced this as more of a challenge than copers ( $M = 2.27, SD = 1.01$ ),  $p = .006$ , and more of a challenge than thrivers ( $M = 2.00, SD = .79$ ),  $p = .016$ .

#### *United or Divided, Strugglers, Copers and Thrivers*

A one-way ANOVA was used to test relationships between the stepcouple types and the shared parenting challenges. The degree of challenge for *dealing with sharing decisions with a former partner* differed significantly across the six types,  $F(5,26) = 3.59, p = .014$ . Scheffe post-hoc comparisons indicate that united strugglers ( $M = 3.80, SD = 1.01$ ) experienced *dealing with sharing decisions with a former partner* as a greater challenge than united copers ( $M = 2.06, SD = .73$ ),  $p = .048$ . A categorical summary of these significant relationships is presented in Table 8.

Table 8

*Significant Relationships among Challenges and Types*

|  | Strugglers          | United Strugglers |
|--|---------------------|-------------------|
| <i>Events with extended family</i>           | Copers              |                   |
| <i>Legal issues</i>                          | Copers              |                   |
| <i>Financial issues</i>                      | Copers              |                   |
| <i>Presence of former partner</i>            | Copers<br>Thriviers |                   |
| <i>Sharing decisions with former partner</i> | Copers<br>Thriviers | United Copers     |

Note: Strugglers or United Strugglers were significantly more challenged in the five areas listed than the other types indicated above.

*Shared Parenting Narrative Themes and Marital Satisfaction*

A one-way analysis of variance test was used to determine the relationship between marital satisfaction and the narrative theme typology of strugglers, copers, and thrivers. The results were not significant  $F(2,29) = .59, p = .57$ . Similarly, the same test was used to determine the relationship between marital satisfaction and the narrative theme typology of united strugglers, united copers, united thrivers, divided strugglers, divided copers and divided thrivers. These results were also non-significant  $F(5,26) = .88, p = .51$ . Finally, a t-test was conducted to determine the relationship between the narrative theme typology of united and divided without significant results  $t(30) = .75, p = .46$ . The marital satisfaction means and standard deviations for each type are presented in Table 9.

Table 9

*Stepcouple Types and Marital Satisfaction Level*

| Type                      | Frequency | Mean   | SD    |
|---------------------------|-----------|--------|-------|
| <i>Strugglers</i>         | 14        | 108.46 | 27.06 |
| <i>Copers</i>             | 13        | 113.19 | 25.74 |
| <i>Thrivers</i>           | 5         | 98.3   | 27.62 |
| <i>United</i>             | 21        | 115.43 | 22.81 |
| <i>Divided</i>            | 11        | 107.91 | 34.05 |
| <i>United Strugglers</i>  | 10        | 113.90 | 20.18 |
| <i>United Copers</i>      | 8         | 113.81 | 20.87 |
| <i>United Thrivers</i>    | 3         | 111.17 | 30.05 |
| <i>Divided Strugglers</i> | 4         | 94.88  | 40.08 |
| <i>Divided Copers</i>     | 5         | 112.20 | 34.97 |
| <i>Divided Thrivers</i>   | 2         | 79.00  | 2.12  |

Note:  $N = 32$  for each of the three typologies.

*Shared Parenting Challenges and Marital Satisfaction*

A one-way ANOVA was used to test relationships between marital satisfaction levels (high, medium and low) and several shared parenting challenges. The levels of marital satisfaction were determined by adding one standard deviation above and below the mean to determine the scores that high marital satisfaction and low marital satisfaction would capture. Scores of 108.8 and above were considered high, scores of

80.26 – 108.79 were considered medium and scores of 108.25 and below were considered low in marital satisfaction. These three levels of marital satisfaction were compared with the 17 challenges in the Likert items to determine relationships between the variables.

The challenge of *accepting a different kind of life than imagined* differed significantly across the three levels of marital satisfaction,  $F(2, 29) = 5.42, p = .010$ . Scheffe post-hoc comparisons indicated that couples with low marital satisfaction ( $M = 2.86, SD = 1.14$ ) experienced this as a greater challenge than couples with high marital satisfaction ( $M = 1.86, SD = .66$ ),  $p = .030$ . The challenge of *managing money in the context of a stepfamily* differed significantly across the three levels of marital satisfaction,  $F(2, 29) = 5.69, p = .008$ . Scheffe post-hoc comparisons indicated that couples with low marital satisfaction ( $M = 3.5, SD = .817$ ) experienced this as a greater challenge than couples with high marital satisfaction ( $M = 2.13, SD = .92$ ),  $p = .009$ . Also, the challenge of *accepting the family is different than imagined* differed significantly across the three levels of marital satisfaction,  $F(2, 29) = 7.45, p = .002$ . Scheffe post-hoc comparisons indicated that couples with low marital satisfaction ( $M = 2.71, SD = 1.04$ ) experienced this as a greater challenge than couples with high marital satisfaction ( $M = 1.58, SD = .35$ ),  $p = .013$ , and couples with medium marital satisfaction ( $M = 2.71, SD = .70$ ) experienced this as a greater challenge than couples with high marital satisfaction,  $p = .021$ . The mean marital satisfaction scores for each of these challenges are presented in Table 10.

Table 10

*Challenges by Marital Satisfaction*

|  | Low       | Medium    | High                    |
|--|-----------|-----------|-------------------------|
|  | Mean/SD   | Mean/SD   | Mean/SD                 |
| <i>Accepting a different life than imagined</i>        | 2.86/1.14 | 2.71/.70  | 1.86/.66 <sup>L</sup>   |
| <i>Managing money in the context of a stepfamily</i>   | 3.50/.82  | 2.71/.99  | 2.14/.92 <sup>L</sup>   |
| <i>Accepting the family is different than imagined</i> | 2.71/1.04 | 2.64/1.28 | 1.58/.35 <sup>L M</sup> |

Note: The letter "L" indicates the significant differences between low marital satisfaction and the other levels indicated. The letter "M" indicates the significant differences between medium marital satisfaction and the other levels indicated. Means for couples were calculated using the average of their totaled score.

### Summary of Results

This chapter presented the findings on the qualities of shared parenting communication, the narrative themes that emerged in the telling of the stepcouples' shared parenting stories, the challenges that stepcouples face with shared parenting communication, and the relationships between the shared parenting narratives, challenges and marital satisfaction. Stepcouples engage in different types of communication which are characterized by differences in agency, composition and delivery of the message. Stepparents often play an active role directly or indirectly in the shared parenting communication. Stepparents communicate directly with the shared parenting participants

when the stepcouple employs coercive communication. They participate indirectly in shared parenting when stepcouples employ conferred and consultative communication across households.

Stepcouples narratives about their experiences can be categorized by the four dichotomous dimensions of regard-disregard, decency-duplicity, facilitation-interference, and accommodation-inflexibility. The narratives stepcouples tell about their shared parenting experiences can identify them as making sense of this phenomenon as thrivers, copers or strugglers. Significant differences were seen in narrative theme typologies and shared parenting challenges, as well as with shared parenting challenges and marital satisfaction levels. Chapter IV provides a conclusion to this dissertation by discussing the major findings of the study.

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION

Shared parenting is a frequently researched topic which has in the past focused primarily on outcomes for the post-divorce bioparent dyad and the children, even though the bioparents may be remarried and thus the shared children may have one or two involved stepparents. Consequently, the research conducted in this study adopted a stepcouple focused approach in order to examine how this shared parenting phenomenon, accomplished through communication, is experienced and managed by them. Of particular interest was the role of the stepparent in shared parenting, the impact of shared parenting on the stepcouple, the challenges shared parenting presents to the stepcouple, and how sharing parenting with a third or fourth parent is related to their marital satisfaction. The following discussion includes conclusions drawn from analyses conducted in these areas, and is informed by the social constructionist family systems approach.

#### Principal Findings

Specifically, this study has uncovered ten major findings which illuminate how stepcouples accomplish shared parenting and how it impacts them. Also, an examination of these findings generates a theory based on shared parenting values which helps explain and predict the quality of shared parenting relationships and interactions.

1. Stepparents are participants in shared parenting communication and activities, rendering shared parenting a triadic or quadadic communication activity.
2. Stepcouples accomplish shared parenting communication by utilizing four approaches: coactive, conferred (synchronous and asynchronous), consultative, and non-consultative.
3. Stepcouples' narratives about sharing parenting reveal both inclusive and exclusive orientations to shared parenting.
4. Stepcouples' narratives about shared parenting socially construct the experiences along dichotomous dimensions of regard-disregard, decency-duplicity, facilitation-interference, and accommodation-inflexibility.
5. There are significant common turning points which affect the quality of the shared parenting relationship and interactions.
6. Through their narratives about shared parenting, stepcouples socially construct themselves as strugglers, copers or thrivers.
7. New challenges for stepcouples were identified and can be labeled as internal or external to the shared parenting communication system.
8. Strugglers experienced shared parenting-related challenges more than copers and thrivers.
9. Challenges stepcouples experienced which were related to marital satisfaction were not shared parenting challenges.
10. Experiencing shared parenting as strugglers, copers or thrivers has little or no impact on marital satisfaction.

The remainder of this chapter discusses each of these research findings, including the proposed theory of shared parenting values, as well as strengths, limitations and implications for the study.

*Findings 1 & 2: Stepparent Participation in Shared Parenting Communication*

It is clear that stepparents participate both directly and indirectly in shared parenting communication and decisions. Direct communication occurs mainly through face to face interaction, telephone, and email. In this study stepparent direct communication across households occurs in 40% of the 32 cases. The percentage of stepmothers compared to stepfathers who participate in direct shared parenting communication was about equal. However, stepmothers engaged in such communication significantly more frequently than stepfathers. It appears that for these stepmothers gender role expectations in the family have a significant impact on their shared parenting communication involvement. While the male role for stepfathers carries no expectations for direct involvement with stepchildren and household management, this is not the case for stepmothers, who often work to fulfill the expected and appropriate gendered roles and behaviors of women in the family (Weaver and Coleman, 2005). It's probable that the frequency of shared parenting communication for stepmothers, as compared to stepfathers, is due to the gender expectations for their participation in managing the children's schedule and activities. Such participation would necessitate more frequent interaction across households.

The participation of stepparents in shared parenting also occurs indirectly, through certain stepcouple shared parenting communication approaches. This indirect stepparent involvement occurs in 75% of the stepcouples shared parenting interactions.

The stepcouples displayed four approaches to shared parenting communication, three of which involve stepparent participation. These methods stepcouples employ to engage in shared parenting communication across households were identified as *coactive*, *conferred (synchronous and asynchronous)*, *consultative*, and *non-consultative*. The *non-consultative* approach is the method which excludes stepparents from shared parenting communication. When this approach is used, the bioparent acts alone in the communication without consulting the stepparent. The message is composed and delivered solely by the bioparent. The other three approaches involve the stepparent participation in various degrees of agency, message composition, and delivery.

In the *coactive* approach, both parents take an active, direct role in shared parenting communication. The stepparent is recognized as a legitimate agent by both the bioparent and the parent(s) in the other household. The message is composed and delivered individually by either the bioparent or the stepparent. In the *conferred* approach, both the bioparent and the stepparent take an active role in formulating the message. However, only one parent is delegated to communicate across households. Often the stepparent partner is indirectly involved, and the biological parent is the spokesperson for the synchronously or asynchronously conferred communication. When using the *consultative* approach, the stepparent acts as coach or consultant for the bioparent who may or may not follow his or her advice. The bioparent makes the final decision about the composition of the message and delivers it. These stepcouple approaches to shared parenting communication constitute different ways that the stepcouple "does" shared parenting. For some stepcouples it is a joint accomplishment

and for others, who employ the non-consultative approach, it is reserved solely for the bioparent.

These results expand the conceptualization of shared parenting consisting of a coparental dyad, to shared parenting consisting of a triadic or quadadic system. While most prior research has focused on the "coparental dyad" consisting of the two biological parents (e.g., Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987; Ahrons & Rodgers 1987; Baum, 2004; Bonbach, 2005; 2009; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1995; Maccoby, Depner, & Mnookin, 1990; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Madden-Derdich, Leonard, & Christopher, 1999) others have included grandparents (e.g., Goodman, 2003; Goodman and Silverstein, 2002) as a third addition to the shared parenting system. Only one study to date (Braithwaite et al., 2003) has included stepparents in research on the shared parenting system. Braithwaite et al. (2003) examined various aspects of shared parenting communication including that of stepparents. However, because the interaction initiation information by these researchers did not identify the respondents by parent role there were no definitive results presented as to the extent of the role that stepparents play in shared parenting communication. This present research contributes findings which help to fill that gap.

*Finding 3: Narratives of Shared Parenting Inclusiveness or Exclusiveness*

The inclusion of stepparents in the shared parenting communication was also revealed in how they talked about their shared parenting experiences. In their recounting of their experiences, the stepcouples revealed they had either a united approach to shared parenting across households or a divided approach. In other words, the couples made sense of this experience as either something which was shared for both the bioparent and stepparent, or not shared and reserved for only one, the bioparent, to manage. There were

four factors which identified the stepcouples as either united or divided: 1) the degree to which the couples shared decisions about shared parenting, 2) the type of communication engaged in across households, 3) explicit statements made about how involved each member of the couple was in shared parenting communication, and 4) the discursive practices engaged in when telling the stories (i.e., the level of we-ness being utilized).

In their talk about shared parenting, stepcouples who are *united* co-construct an inclusive, joint approach to shared parenting. They often describe decision making as a participatory activity which they engage in fairly equally. As well, they are more likely to share stories which indicate they use coactive, conferred, and consultative communication approaches to shared parenting. They also use explicit statements which directly define shared parenting as a joint activity for them. For example, "We always discuss it, together." Finally, these couples tend to use more we-ness when talking about their shared parenting experiences. That is, they are more likely to make statements using "we" or "us," than "I" or "me." I- and we-statements send relationship messages which indicate the relational distance produced (Kantor & Lehr, 1975). We-statements are declarative sentences that attempt to locate experiences in a relationship rather than in a person (Burr, 1990). "They communicate that the two people are jointly involved in the situation; and this emphasizes the mutuality, connectedness and interinvolved aspects of the relationship" (Burr, 1990, pp. 268-269). The above example illustrates both direct definition and we-ness.

In contrast, *divided* couples often use more "I" and "me" pronouns when they talk about shared parenting experiences. I-statements identify an experience at an individual level (Burr, 1990). Such I-statements "emphasize the individuality, autonomy,

separateness, and independence of the people involved" (Burr 1990, p. 268). For example, "Yeah, I just usually take care of it on my own." This statement is reflective of both the lack of we-ness and also explicit statements which directly define the shared parenting as exclusive. Also, divided couples tend to share narratives indicating that their communication across households is often non-consultative. Most communication is reserved for the bioparents to handle. As well, most shared parenting decisions are handled solely by the bioparents.

Stepcouples tend to indicate in their narratives about shared parenting whether or not the stepparent is included in the shared parenting communication and activities. For united couples there tends to be joint involvement and mutuality, and for divided couples the stepparent acts more independently and autonomously. Stepparents in the divided couples are not always excluded from the construction of their exclusion in shared parenting. That is, they also sometimes co-construct this excluded position with regard to shared parenting. For some stepparents exclusion from shared parenting is clearly a desirable position, and for others it is not. It's possible also that those stepparents who are included in shared parenting may prefer not to be. Crosbie-Burnett (1989) proposes that sharing children with parents in their other home releases stepparents from parental role responsibilities and thus allows them to concentrate on their marriage and creating pleasant relationships with their stepchildren. If stepparents believe that dealing with their spouse's former partner is interfering with their own relational goals, then they may prefer to be excluded. Likewise, if the shared parenting is a source of great stress, the stepparent may wish to be excluded. Though it was beyond the scope of this study, the stepparent's satisfaction with inclusion or exclusion from shared parenting is an important

consideration when evaluating the united and divided nature of the narratives about shared parenting experiences.

*Finding 4: Dichotomous Dimensions of Shared Parenting Experiences*

Stepcouples' narratives about their significant shared parenting experiences emerged as major themes along dichotomous dimensions of positivity and negativity. Analysis of these narratives identified core thematic categories which characterize these positive and negative narratives. The stepcouples' positive narratives of their experiences illustrated *regard, decency, facilitation* and *accommodation*, and their negative narratives illustrated *disregard, duplicity, interference*, and *inflexibility*. These themes can be viewed as dichotomous dimensions of positivity and negativity, where regard-disregard, decency-duplicity, facilitation-interference, and accommodation-inflexibility are polar opposites on their particular dimension. Narratives about negative experiences of disregard, duplicity, interference and inflexibility and are on one pole of the dimension and narratives about positive experiences of regard, decency, facilitation and accommodation are on the opposing pole of the dimension.

What these themes represent is a deeper level of meaning to shared parenting beyond "getting along" or not. The events which contribute to the formation of the dimensions are significant experiences, and are manifested through certain specific behaviors which can be located on a spectrum of positivity to negativity. Most previous research on the coparenting biological parent dyad has identified this relationship as having a range of positive to negative relational quality (e.g., Ahrons and Rogers, 1987; Baum, 2004; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). This prior research contributed a conceptualization of the coparenting relationship as having particular styles related to

relational outcomes, but did not necessarily identify the communicative activities which contribute to these qualities. Broad terms such as antagonistic, cooperative or conflictual may not sufficiently account for how this outcome is accomplished. Antagonism, cooperation, and conflict are constituted or enacted through communicative acts. Identifying what behaviors contribute to negative and positive shared parenting experiences and what they mean, helps us to understand how these events may be interpreted, and thus contribute to the quality of the relationship.

*Finding 5: Turning Points in Shared Parenting Relationships*

Stepcouples narratives about their experiences revealed eight major turning points in the shared parenting interactions and relationships. These turning points include 1) *legal maneuvers*, 2) *broken agreements*, 3) *marriage or divorce*, 4) *conversations*, 5) *communicative agency*, 6) *boundary setting*, 7) *overtures*, and 8) *general maturation*. These events caused a turning point in the quality of the shared parenting relationship and interactions. Turning points are transformative events which alter relationships either positively or negatively in some important way (Bolton, 1961).

For the participants in this study, boundary setting and duplicity were responsible for negative changes in the shared parenting system, while overtures and general maturation were responsible for positive changes in the shared parenting system. Legal maneuvers, marital status, conversations and communicative agency were responsible for both positive and negative changes in the shared parenting relationship. Many of these turning points have an additional layer of meaning as they can be located on the dimensional poles of positive and negative experiences. For example, legal maneuvers can mean interference or inflexibility depending on the situation. As well, conversations

can mean facilitation or duplicity. This level of inspection provides yet a further interpretation of turning points as related to broader positive and negative categories of experiences with shared parenting.

A few studies have conducted inquiries into turning points in stepfamily relationships (see Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson, 1999; Graham, 1997) but in the only other study to date which examines turning points related to shared parenting, Graham (1997) identified 11 turning points in the post-divorce relationship. Most of the turning points identified were categorized broadly as developmental stage or intrapersonal in nature. For example, *life improving events* and *relocation* were named as turning points. However, one of the turning points identified was the *dysfunctional former spouse relationship* which was a broad category that included relating across households. This turning point consisted of instances of painful disclosure, legal procedures, conflict and disagreement, and a steady decline in the relationship. These events which contributed to the general category of the *dysfunctional spouse relationship* turning point are the most closely related to the turning points identified in this study on shared parenting.

What distinguishes the present research from this prior research on turning points in shared parenting relationships and interactions is the identification as the locus of change, specific relational communication variables within the shared parenting system. Certain of these turning points are directly communicative in nature (e.g., conversations, communicative agency, overtures and duplicity) and are more broadly categorized as variables which are directly connected to the positive and negative meaningful experiences with shared parenting (e.g., duplicity, interference, accommodation, and

regard). Identifying turning points from a relational perspective may provide opportunities for restraint or action which can deliberately impact the shared parenting system.

*Finding 6: Narrative Construction of Strugglers, Copers and Thrivers*

A typology of the meaning of shared parenting for stepcouples identifies them as strugglers, copers and thrivers based on the impact this relationship has upon them.

Thrivers tend to experience shared parenting as something which is beneficial to them and a significant positive aspect of their and their children's lives. It is often comfortable to manage, and they define it as positive or beneficial. Copers see shared parenting as an inconvenience, but not significantly so. It is something they tolerate as neither beneficial nor detrimental. They are ambivalent about its effects while tending to minimize the negatives. Strugglers experience shared parenting interactions as something which presents a challenge. It is a hardship to endure and a significant negative aspect of their lives. They define it as negative and use disparaging remarks to describe it. These types differed also in their shared parenting interaction satisfaction and interaction frequency.

As might be expected, there was a statistically significant difference in shared parenting interaction satisfaction between strugglers and the other two types, where strugglers reported the lowest satisfaction with the interactions across households and thrivers, the highest. It makes sense that stepcouples who construct their shared parenting experience as positive and beneficial would also indicate that they are satisfied with the interactions. Likewise, stepcouples who construct their shared parenting experience as negative and destructive would be very unsatisfied with the interactions. Of course, it is the interactions in shared parenting which are the topics of the narratives, and thus one of

the sources of the construction of these realities and identities. Communication shapes relational realities and relational realities shape communication (Shotter, 1993). So, it follows also that the satisfaction in the interactions contributes to the production the shared parenting identities.

Another significant finding is the relationship between the frequency of interactions across households and the struggler, copier and thriver identities. Thrivers communicate the most frequently, and strugglers, the least. It seems reasonable that strugglers, who regularly have unpleasant interactions, would tend to minimize them and thrivers, who have pleasant interactions, would engage in them more frequently. One way that people involved in undesired relationships cope with these is by distancing themselves from the others through reducing the duration of interactions or avoiding them (Hess, 2002). Copers likely communicate as needed, and perhaps strugglers learn to adjust to less than the number of necessary interactions in order to avoid them. They may compensate, for example, by relying on the established schedule and choosing not to request changes so as not to have to interact. With strugglers, the average number of times per month that they communicate with the parents in the other household is about 5, for copers it is 11 and thrivers it is 19. Braithwaite et al. (2003) found that their population of "parent teams" communicated an average of 12 times per month (6 times in the two week data collection period). The 22 individuals in their study were described as having "achieved a state of equilibrium and developed ways to interact which worked reasonable well" (Braithwaite et al., 2003, p. 93). This description and frequency of interaction suggest that these individuals may belong to copier stepcouple type.

Finally, the analytical approach in this present study represents a significant shift in these findings. This shift lies in not categorizing these stepcouples based on the quality of their relationship with the other parents. That is, there is not ascribed to them an adjective which typifies the shared parenting relationship (e.g., antagonistic, parallel, etc.). This present research attempted to take the stepcouple's meaning-making into account to identify how they make sense of this shared parenting experience. The objective in this approach was to determine what this shared parenting experience means for them. Fiese et al. (1999) support this objective in family research in that they believe "an examination of family narratives highlights the process of meaning-making and takes as its core the interpretation of experiences from the family's perspective" (p. 3). This typology of shared parenting relationships reflects the stepcouple's perspective toward shared parenting. It is not an externally ascribed identity, but an identity produced within the couple, though recognized externally by the researcher, through the telling of their shared parenting stories.

#### *Findings 7, 8, & 9: Shared Parenting Challenges*

There were a total of 15 areas of challenge which emerged in the qualitative analysis of the narratives that the stepcouples told about their experiences sharing parenting. The challenges identified included issues with 1) financial matters, 2) legal procedures, 3) conflict, 4) differing discipline, 5) differing values, 6) differing religions, 7) managing schedules, 8) coordinating exchanges, 9) time apart from the children, 10) poor communication, 11) parental alienation syndrome, 12) agency in the schools, 13) establishing the stepparent role, 14) sharing decisions, and 15) the presence of the former spouse in the stepcouples' lives. These descriptive findings about shared parenting

challenges help to identify shared parenting challenges from the stepcouple's perspective. This information supplements the data collected from predetermined lists of challenges from the Questionnaire for Couples in Stepfamilies (QCS) (Beaudry et al., 2001) and the questionnaire on shared parenting challenges from the present study which was modified from the QCS. Because shared parenting was the focus of the present study, the challenges identified were most relevant to that aspect of stepcouples' lives. Thus, several new challenges emerged that were not included in the QCS or anticipated in the adapted questionnaire administered to the stepcouples.

Most of the new areas of shared parenting challenges identified from the qualitative data were specifically centered on the relationships and interactions between the parents in the children's two homes. These newly identified challenges include 1) conflict, 2) differing discipline, 3) differing values, 4) differing religions, 5) coordinating exchanges, 7) time apart from the children, 8) poor communication, and 9) parental alienation syndrome. With the exception of time apart from the children, these challenges concern the shared parenting system. Though Beaudry et al. (2001) identify maintaining a relationship with a former spouse as one of four themes of difficulties endured by stepcouples, and seek to identify specific difficulties in all the areas, these challenges are not included in the QCS. Including items such as *dealing with the different values taught to the children in their other home*, a challenge identified in this present study, and *dealing with sharing decisions with my or my spouse's former partner*, an item included in the questionnaire administered in this present study, could provide useful information on the degree to which shared parenting presents a challenge for these couples.

Data obtained from the shared parenting challenges questionnaire in this present study did provide some meaningful information about the kinds of difficulties that the stepcouples experience. For example, the three most frequently listed challenges that the stepcouples indicated they wanted to change included 1) dealing with discipline in the home, 2) dealing with financial issues, 3) sharing decisions with former partner or spouse's former partner. While the first two challenges are not particularly shared parenting system related, sharing decisions with the parent(s) in the other home is a difficulty directly related to shared parenting for stepcouples. Having to share decisions that affect them and their family with an interested third party is a unique family experience reserved for stepfamily couples with children living in two homes. The least frequently listed items the participants desired to change were operating as a stepfamily in society and dealing with the positive feelings of the children.

There were significant differences seen in the degree of challenge experienced and several of the shared parenting types. In particular, *strugglers* experienced as more of a challenge than *copers* 1) *participating in events with the extended family including my or my spouse's former partner and their kin*, 2) *dealing with legal issues which arise for stepfamilies*, 3) *dealing with financial issues which arise for stepfamilies*, 4) *dealing with the presence of my or my spouse's former partner in my current family life*, and 5) *dealing with sharing decisions (that affect me and my stepfamily) with my or my spouse's former partner*. Also *strugglers* experienced as more of a challenge than *thrivers* the issue of *dealing with the presence of the former partner and sharing decisions with the former partner*. As well, *united strugglers* experienced as more of a challenge than *united copers* *sharing decisions with the former partner*.

The items which tended to present a greater challenge to strugglers were issues particularly related to dealing with shared parenting participants. Participating in events with the extended family, as well as dealing with the presence of the former partner and sharing decisions with the former partner can be directly related to challenges with shared parenting. Financial and legal issues that arise for stepfamilies may also be directly related to shared parenting. For example, it is unlikely that there would be stepfamily related legal issues if there weren't shared parenting participants interested in modifying such agreements as custody and child support. Challenges which were more general stepfamily related, such as dealing with the stepparent role and operating as a stepfamily in society, for example, did not present a significantly greater challenge for strugglers. It appears that for struggler couples challenges related to shared parenting were more salient than general stepfamily-related challenges. Ganong and Coleman (2004) suggest that shared parenting means more interaction with former partners thus introducing more complexity and stress for stepcouples. This finding seems to support this proposition.

The items which presented a challenge related to stepcouples' marital satisfaction levels were not particularly related to the shared parenting relationship. Though all could be indirectly related to shared parenting, most seem to be challenges with general quality of family life. Items which are more directly shared parenting related, such as *sharing decisions with the former partner* or *adapting to the children's schedule* were not significantly different in degree of challenge for the three levels of marital satisfaction. The challenges of *accepting the family is different than imagined* and *accepting a different life than imagined* seem to be related to unhappiness with their life, rather than with the shared parenting situation. As well, *managing money in the context of the*

*stepfamily* does not seem to be related directly to the shared parenting relationship. Disagreements over money are often cited as a source of problems in marriage (Burns, 1984; Cleek & Pearson, 1985; Kitson, 1992). So, this particular challenge and the other two which relate to disappointments with their life in general are more resonant of challenges with general dissatisfaction than to shared parenting experiences. The shared parenting relationship, per se, does seem to be related to marital satisfaction. This finding is consistent with the finding discussed further in the next section.

*Finding 10: Shared Parenting and Marital Satisfaction*

Likely the most important and encouraging finding which emerged from this study is that for these stepcouples, there was no significant relationship between the shared parenting identity as strugglers, copers or thrivers and marital satisfaction. The lack of a statistically significant difference in the marital satisfaction among these types indicates that there appears to be no spillover effect between the shared parenting relationship and satisfaction in the marital relationship. Remarriage has been found to have equivalent marital satisfaction as first marriages, yet has more instability (Ganong & Coleman 1994; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Segrin & Flora, 2005). Ganong and Coleman (2004) identify three factors in remarriage which may be the cause of marital instability. One of these causes is *selection*, which refers to the individuals who are poor candidates being differently selected into remarriage. Another explanation is *evolution*, which presumes that remarriage is a genetically motivated reproductive strategy. The final cause is referred to as *interpersonal factors* which involve the presence of stepchildren, the custody arrangement, and dealing with former partners. Considering that it is well-documented that there is a positive relationship between marital satisfaction and marital

stability (Rodrigues, Hall, & Fincham, 2006), this finding helps to rule out shared parenting as one of the hypothesized conditions that may account for the instability of remarriage.

In addition to increasing understanding about the role that stepparents play in shared parenting and how this role is enacted by stepcouples, these findings also provide insight into their relational experiences with sharing parenting. This study identified the meaning of these experiences of stepcouples along dichotomous dimensions of negativity and positivity. These relational experiences impact the couples in terms of challenges, turning points, and orientations to the relationship. Further consideration of the findings related to shared parenting relational experiences help elucidate a theory based on shared parenting values.

#### Toward a Theory of Shared Parenting Values Expectancy

Given the diverse outcomes and complicated nature of shared parenting, with variations in quality, number of agents, and systemic turns, gaining a full understanding of shared parenting communication and relating for stepcouples requires a consideration of the foundation upon which this dyad co-constructs, and makes sense of, this phenomenon. Accordingly, this dissertation introduces five assumptions for a new *Theory of Shared Parenting Values Expectancy*. These assumptions are grounded in the results produced by this research and will be explained through a consideration of these findings.

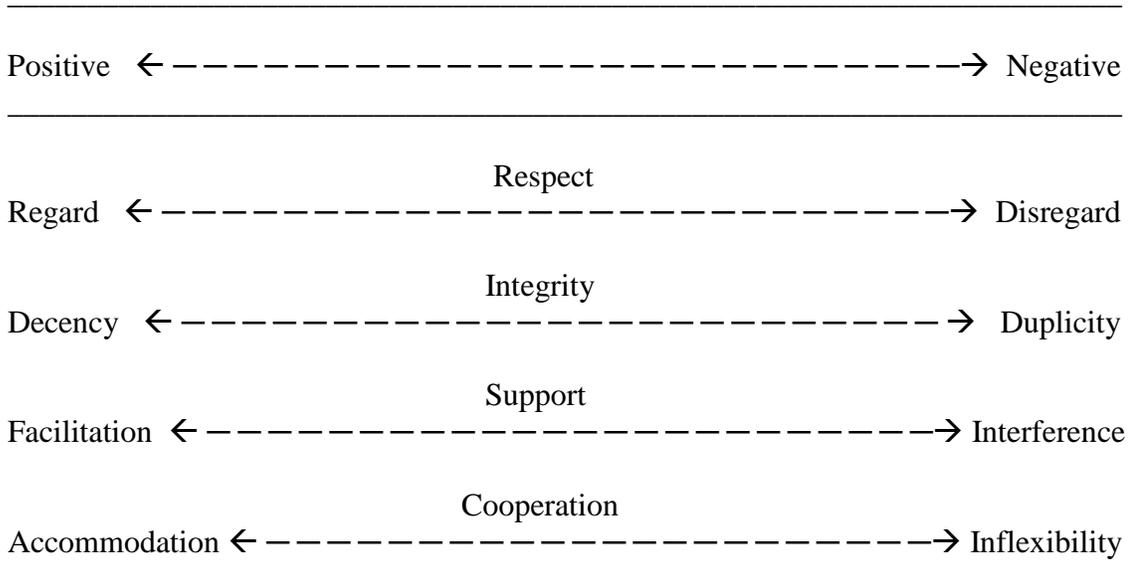
#### *Theoretical Assumptions*

*Assumption 1. Stepcouples make sense of their shared parenting relationship based on ethical behavior manifested as four core shared parenting values: respect, integrity, support, and cooperation.* The dichotomous dimensions of shared parenting

experiences each exhibit a core shared parenting value, where the value of respect is manifested in behaviors along the dimension of regard-disregard, the value of integrity is manifested in behaviors along the dimension of decency-duplicity, the value of support is manifested along the dimension of facilitation-interference and the value of cooperation is manifested along the dimension of accommodation-inflexibility. These values and dimensions are displayed in Figure 5.

Figure 5

*Shared Parenting Values in Dichotomous Dimensions*



*Respect.* The *respect* value is reflected in the narratives about communication of regard and disregard in the shared parenting interactions. Regard was often communicated indirectly through inclusion in parenting activities and directly through expressed recognition of the parenting and family roles. Disregard occurred when certain family members were excluded from consideration as having a parenting role, and

sometimes there was an intrusion into the new family life which disregarded the boundaries of the new family. This shared parenting value largely centers on levels of recognition and respect for parental and family roles. Narratives about displays of regard and disregard signify the presence of a core, general value of respect.

*Integrity.* The *integrity* value is reflected in the narratives about decent and duplicitous communicative behavior on the part of the shared parenting participants. Displays of decency involved behaviors which were considered reasonable or right according to the stepcouple. The shared parenting participants demonstrated general principled conduct and dependability. Duplicitous displays involved dishonesty and broken agreements. The shared parenting partners were not seen as dependable or trustworthy. The integrity value was characterized by stories which focused on principles and levels of dependability when dealing with shared parenting participants.

*Support.* Narratives about facilitation and interference reflect the value of *support* when sharing parenting. Displays of facilitation were manifested in the enforcing of rules and discipline across households. The parenting decisions in one household were backed and maintained in the other household or the decisions are mutually agreed upon in advance. The opposing pole of the facilitation dimension is interference. Interference occurred when the shared parenting participants interfered with communication between the children and the stepcouple, as well as the time they were scheduled to spend together. The support value was reflected in experiences of levels of facilitation of the parental wishes for, and relationship with, the children.

*Cooperation.* The cooperation value is reflected in the communicative behaviors relating to narratives of accommodation and inflexibility. Often when accommodation

was experienced, the narratives were about experiences of adjustments being made for a change in plans. The shared parenting participants willingly adjusted to the requested change in the children's and parents' schedules. When inflexibility was the theme in the data, the stories were about experiences of seemingly unreasonable rejections of the proposed modifications. The rejections of the proposed changes were seen as unjust or irrational. This dimension centered on the value of cooperation for sharing the children.

What the preceding explication of shared parenting values demonstrates is both the process and outcome of systematic grounded theory coding. These values constitute theoretical codes. Such codes integrate the categories and move them into a theoretical direction (Charmaz, 2006). The values were identified based on the narrative categories comprising the dichotomous dimensions, concepts which emerged from stories about specific shared parenting experiences. The recounted events themselves are the base level of meaning, followed by the categorization of the events as negative or positive, then further categorized as negative or positive experiences of certain concepts (e.g., duplicity or facilitation), and finally identified as reflecting core values, which form the foundation of the theory. The theory is grounded in the data. Charmaz (2006) describes this process as something which "pulls together disparate experiences in the category and elucidates the range of its tacit meanings" (p. 147). The tacit meaning of the shared parenting experiences, which emerged in the narrative analysis, is the expectation of adherence to core relational values in shared parenting. These core relational values form the foundation for the theory that emanates from this systematic research.

*Assumption 2: The degrees of violation or honoring of shared parenting values create associations with particular shared parenting relational realities and identities.*

Narratives about experiences of struggling, coping, and thriving in the shared parenting in effect construct this as a reality and identity for the stepcouples who tell them. In "talking through" their conceptions of their experiences, couples construct their reality, including who they are and what they believe (Berger & Kellner, 1994). Although all the stepcouples recounted both positive and negative experiences with shared parenting, these experiences and the stories about them were diverse in their intensity along the dichotomous dimensions. Each of the shared parenting types thus constitute ways of "doing" shared parenting for the stepcouple. Struggler, coper and thriver couples recounted narratives of marked differences in the degrees of violation or honoring of shared parenting values, thus ascribing to them different meanings, realities and identities.

Strugglers tended to relate stories on the extreme negative dimensional pole, telling stories about such experiences as parental alienation which violates the value of respect, duplicity and support. Thrivers related stories on the extreme positive pole, describing, for example, experiences of inclusion in family events which honor the support and respect values. These two types also tended to use evaluative language to indicate their perception of the degree of positivity or negativity of these events. In the struggler couples especially, there was significant use of loaded language which contributed to the perception of these events as a struggle, and themselves as strugglers against them. Stressful family events are often made sense of through the telling of narratives about them (e.g., Pennebaker, 2003; Weber, Harvey, & Stanley, 1987; Weiss, 1975). These struggler couples make sense of these experiences as a challenge they must grapple with. The copers, on the other hand, told stories which were more neutral. They

used less evaluative language, often minimizing the negative or implying it was a temporary set-back, thus indicating that their experiences fell more in the middle of the two poles. They construct the reality and identity as a couple who tolerates the inconvenience of shared parenting.

*Assumption 3: The violation or honoring of shared parenting values, reflected in stepcouples' narratives, affects their level of satisfaction with the shared parenting communication and relationship.* The stories stepcouples tell about the honoring or violation of these core values identify them as strugglers, copers or thrivers in the shared parenting relationship. Couples who are strugglers are significantly less satisfied with the shared parenting interactions than are copers and thrivers. Struggler couples perceive they experience intense violation of these shared parenting values, while thrivers perceive a fulfillment of them. These relational values can also be considered *relational expectations*. A value cannot be violated if it is not presumed to be the expected standard of behavior.

Several studies have identified a relationship between the fulfillment or violation of relational expectations and relational satisfaction (Bochner, Krueger, and Chimielewski, 1982; Jacob, Kornblith, Andreson, & Hartz, 1978; Kelley; 1999; Kelley and Burgoon; 1991; Levitt, Coffman, Guacci-Franco, & Loveless, 1994; Quick & Jacob, 1973). Distinguishing their study from previous research which focused on negative relational expectation violations and marital satisfaction (Bochner et al., 1982; Jacob et al., 1978; Quick & Jacob, 1973), Kelley and Burgoon (1991) conducted research which confirmed the relationship between positive and negative expectancy violations. They found that positive violations of relational expectations lead to highest marital

satisfaction, followed by expectancy fulfillment and lastly by negatively violated expectations. This research on relational expectations helps to explain the differences in relational satisfaction for strugglers, copers and thrivers in this study, where copers' shared parenting values are largely fulfilled and thus the relationship is reasonably satisfactory. Strugglers experience the violation of these values and are the least satisfied, while thrivers experience the values being exceeded and are the most satisfied with the shared parenting relationship. This study adds to the research on relational expectations and relational satisfaction by expanding it to undesired (potentially) and nonvoluntary relationships.

*Assumption 4: The violation or honoring of the shared parenting values can create turning points in the quality of the shared parenting communication and relationship.* In the telling of the stories about their shared parenting experiences, the stepcouples recounted experiences which changed the trajectory of the shared parenting relationship. These experiences which initiate change are referred to as turning points. Relational turning points are transformative, positive or negative locations of developmental change (Baxter et al., 1999). Such communicative acts constitute choices that shared parenting participants make which affect the relationship (see Bullis, Clark, & Sline, 1993). The stepcouples' relational turning point events can be linked to the expected shared parenting values which have been engaged through a communicative act. Invitations to attend a family event, a positive enactment of the respect value, and obstructing visitation, a negative enactment of the support value are examples of value-driven turning points in the shared parenting relationship. These turning points are a

result of the shared parenting values, which are expectations in the relationship, being violated or honored.

Levitt's Social Expectations Model (Levitt, 1991; Levitt et al., 1994) provides a framework which explains how the violation of expected behavioral standards produces relational change. Levitt's model proposes that relational expectations are influenced by past experiences in the relationship, social cognitive development, and social norms. If relational expectations continue untested then the relationship remains constant. On the other hand, if relational expectations are tested then there are three possible outcomes: 1) confirmation of expectations leads to relational stability, 2) violation of expectations leads to negative relational changes, and 3) having expectations surpassed leads to positive relational changes. It is reasonable to argue that the turning points in shared parenting relationships are the consequence of the testing of the expected shared parenting values.

This conceptualization of turning points as related to core shared parenting values provides a further understanding of shared parenting relational maintenance and development. In addition to significant events, turning points can be characterized as abstract concepts (Baxter et al., 1999). To that end, this conceptualization of shared parenting turning points as related to core values also identifies a meaning-making level of analysis for turning points, beyond triggering events.

*Assumption 5: The violation of shared parenting values constitutes shared parenting challenges for the stepcouple.* Managing the sharing of parenting responsibility with third and fourth parties presents unique challenges for some stepcouples. Unlike first married couples with children, these couples must coordinate and consult with invested

third and sometimes fourth parties when attempting to conduct typical family activities such as vacations, children's activities and scheduling medical appointments. These challenges are often, but not always, directly related to interactions with the other parents in the shared parenting system. Sharing decisions with the parents in the children's other home is an example of a stepcouple's challenge which is directly related to shared parenting. Some challenges, such as operating as a stepfamily in society are not particularly shared parenting related, rather they are general stepfamily challenges. As well, certain challenges such as dealing with the absence of the children, though related to shared parenting, are not directly connected to shared parenting communication or the relationship.

However, a majority of challenges that are fundamentally shared parenting-related are directly connected to the relationship across households. For many couples, the shared parenting relationship qualifies as an undesired relationship. Undesired relationships are those which people would choose to discontinue if internal or external barriers were eliminated (Hess, 2003). Terminating interactions with the shared parenting participants is a barrier because it can have negative consequences for the stepcouples and their relationships with the children. Hess (2003) identified interference with enduring goals as a one of the factors which contribute to a relationship being undesirable. The expectation of the honoring of core shared parenting values can be considered enduring goals for the stepcouples who share parenting. The violation of these values constitutes interference with the stepcouples' enduring goals to have the values honored.

Further, the conflict between expectations and interference of goals creates discomfort and an emotionally strenuous situation (Hess, 2000, 2003). Thus, the violations of values can be considered shared parenting challenges. The interference with these shared parenting goals for honoring of values is a challenge. For example, experiences of specific challenges, such as poor communication manifested as lies or withholding information displays a violation of the integrity value. Thus, the meaning of this challenge is the violation of integrity. This is a challenge because it interferes with the shared parenting goal or expectation of the integrity value. Similarly, the challenge of unreasonable adherence to the children's schedule communicates inflexibility and a violation of the cooperation value. Though certain challenges may be identified as such simply because they are inconveniences, many are challenges because they in fact breach these fundamental principles. This broader examination of issues which present challenges with shared parenting reveals that the violation of the shared parenting values are at least supplemental to this inventory of event-related challenges. They also provide a broader meaning- or sense-making interpretation of stepcouples challenges with sharing parenting.

### *Summary*

This theory posited five assumptions which propose to explain and predict the quality and thus the reality of the coparenting relationship for stepcouples. The foundation of these assumptions rests on relational expectations of shared parenting values which were identified through grounded theory analysis. The ways in which stepcouples make sense of their shared parenting experience with other adults raising the children is centered on ethical behavior manifested as four pivotal shared parenting

values: respect, integrity, support, and cooperation. Based on their experiences of the manifestation of these values, couples construct a shared parenting reality and identity. Communicative acts which either honor or violate these values affect stepcouples' perception of the quality of the shared parenting relationship and interactions. These value-laden communicative acts create turning points in the shared parenting relationship; and when these acts violate the core values, they create challenges and stress for the stepcouples who are sharing parenting with other adults raising the children. This theory helps us to understand shared parenting relational quality and potential maintenance strategies. The implications of this new theory will be discussed further in the following sections.

#### Strengths and Limitations

The utilization of a mixed methods research design emerged as a significant strength of this study. The study design allowed for more rigor than would have been possible with a solely qualitative inquiry. Mixed methods designs create opportunities for data triangulation which leads to a more comprehensive and thorough understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). For example, by looking at both qualitative reports of the quality of interactions as well as measurement results of the satisfaction of the interactions, a more complete portrait of the perception of shared parenting communication was acquired. As well, such comparing and contrasting of multiple sets of quantitative and qualitative data throughout the study provided opportunities for validation and/or expansion of findings. The result was increased breadth, depth and thus rigor for this inquiry.

Another strength of this study which was related to methodology was the utilization of grounded theory for analyzing the narratives. Collecting rich data, with depth and scope, is the foundation for conducting grounded theory. The quality and credibility of a grounded theory study begins with the data (Charmaz, 2006). The thirty-five hours of interviews with the thirty-two couples provided over one hundred and fifty stories about shared parenting, and these were transformed into over 700 pages of transcripts. The rich data which was produced in the interviews helped provide a full picture of the shared parenting experience and thus allowed for the development of core categories. Systematic grounded theory coding provides a focused way of viewing data through which we make discoveries and gain a deeper understanding of the subject (Charmaz, 2006). The results which emerged from this methodology provide many new insights into shared parenting for stepcouples.

As well, in a departure from the common practice of conceptualizing shared parenting as a strictly bioparent dyadic phenomenon, this study included the stepparent as both a subject of the study and a co-creator of the shared parenting experience. Rather than the former partners being the focus of the study, the stepcouple was placed as central to this inquiry. Adamsons and Pasley (2006) call for more research which investigates the processes and interactions of shared parenting which involves more than just the relationship between the two bioparents. Thus, this study did not exclude what was determined to be a central figure in both the process and quality of shared parenting. In fact, the stepcouple's joint construction of their shared parenting experience and the stepparent's role contributed to significant findings in the study. Taking this distinctive

approach allowed for new information and contributions to research to emerge which potentially might not otherwise have been discovered.

There are also limitations to the methods employed in this study. This study had a relatively small sample size for quantitative analyses. Although a sample size of 64 participants or 32 couples is sufficient for in-depth qualitative research, a larger population would have allowed for more generalizable quantitative findings. This population proved to be difficult to recruit. Over a nine month period, 81 representatives of couples expressed an interest in participating in the study. Of those who expressed an interest, 63 couples (77 %) agreed to participate in the study. Of the 63 couples who agreed to participate, only 32 couples (51%) actually completed the process (40% of the initially interested group). Beaudry et al. (2004) experienced similar difficulties in recruiting this relatively broad population using similar recruitment strategies. Though the geographic location for recruitment was more localized, they had a team of four research participants actively recruiting for more than two years and achieved a final sample of only 26 couples. They attribute the recruitment difficulties for this population to the need to travel to the research site and the one-year follow-up questionnaire (Beaudry et al., 2004)

Other recruitment difficulties presumably arise out of the lifestyle of these families. "In fact, these couples face multiple demands, which leave little time for extrafamilial activities such as participation in [a] study" (Beaudry et al., 2004, p. 101). Indeed, scheduling the interviews for this study was a challenging and complicated process due to the lifestyles of the participants. One father/stepfather's email response to an interview time suggestion illustrates this challenge quite well:

Weekdays are close to impossible before 8:30 pm our time. And this Saturday morning we've got a bagel run in 30 minutes, breakfast at 7:30, off to the soccer field by 8:00 to center referee 8:30-9:45, game for Jeremy and Brian 10:00-11:30, game for Anders and Jack 11:30-1:00, assistant/line referee 1:00-2:30, swimming pool fun 2:45-4:00. Tomorrow, Sunday, it's four more games from about 8:30 to 2:30, but I've got a busy late afternoon/early evening to prepare a condo for an open house.

One can see that due to the nature of the stepcouple lifestyle, as depicted in this example, that convenience of the participation is a principal consideration when designing future studies of this population.

Another limitation to this study was the single researcher as coder for the shared parenting typologies. Using multiple coders to rate the category membership in each of these typologies would add validity to the findings. However, this procedure was beyond the scope of this study. Developing measures from the indicators for these typologies which could then be used by multiple coders are important opportunities for future research.

#### Implications and Directions for Further Research

The implications of the findings of this study largely stem from those which contributed to the formulation of the *Theory of Shared Parenting Values Expectancy*. The identification of four core values which serve as the foundation of the shared parenting relationship provides opportunities for new ways of thinking about the shared parenting relationship. First, at its core, is the expectation of adherence to communicative behaviors which uphold expected shared parenting values: respect, integrity, support and cooperation. Stepouples' orientations to the shared parenting relationship and their satisfaction in it are a direct outcome of their perceived violation or honoring of these values. Having to share parenting with other parents who violate these values constitute

challenges for these couples. And, the violation or honoring of these values can cause negative and positive changes in the shared parenting relationship. This theory offers a considerable contribution to the research on shared parenting in that it provides a new lens with which to view shared parenting and a means for explaining and predicting the quality and the reality of the shared parenting relationship for stepcouples.

The focus, hopefully, can be placed on communicative behaviors happening now in the relationship. Certainly the current relationship is shaped by past experiences and perceptions of those. However, as the theory posits, the violation or honoring of the shared parenting values can trigger turning points in the shared parenting relationship. Interventions related to communicative acts which violate these core values may prove useful in deliberately creating constructive turning points in the shared parenting relationship. It is conceivable that the shared parenting relationship could be maneuvered toward more positive outcomes with attention to the value-laden communicative behaviors which are engaged in when communicating across households. This might be a good option for those desiring a change and willing to make changes in their communicative behavior to exact that change.

As well, the way in which stepcouples talk about the shared parenting experiences constructs their view of how the experience impacts them. Identifying certain behavior on the part of the others as values violations might provide opportunities for them to work through the experience in different ways. Also, it is possible that reframing certain perceived violations to reflect a perception less extreme on the negative pole of the dichotomous dimensions may be useful for couples who suffer the values violations. Constructive, deliberate use of self-talk during the perception and interpretation process

may prove beneficial in achieving this reframing. As well, narrative therapy may be useful for helping to transform the degree of challenge experienced and perhaps the shared parenting relationship itself. Narrative therapy adopts a constructionist approach to narratives such that reframing the interpretation of events is a way to change the family system (Polkinghorn, 2004). The powerfully negative stories of strugglers could perhaps be reframed to more neutral or ambivalent perceptions, thus relieving some of the stress that this challenge may place on them.

Testing interventions based on education about the shared parenting values, self-talk and narrative therapy is a fruitful area for future research. As well, conducting an inquiry that takes into consideration both sides of the shared parenting equation could provide new, useful insights as to the differences in perceptions of perceived violations or honoring of the core shared parenting values. Of course, this may present challenges with acquiring participants who present a wide range of orientations to shared parenting. Despite best efforts to get both sides of the equation in this present study, none of the participants were able or willing to produce their shared parenting counterparts as participants. Considering that the only two-sided shared parenting stepcouples willing to participate might be those with an exceptionally cooperative relationship, there also could be a significant potential for sample bias. Creative ways of accessing stepcouples with different types of shared parenting experiences need to be explored in order to achieve this objective.

Another opportunity for future research, but which was beyond the scope of this present study, involves an inquiry into the extent to which stepparents prefer to be included in shared parenting. For some stepcouples inclusion may be welcome and for

others it may be considered a burden. As well, inclusion in certain aspects of shared parenting may be welcome and inclusion in others may not. It is possible also that this could differ for stepmothers and stepfathers. Looking at these differences as well as comparing them to individual's marital satisfaction are significant areas for future research.

Considering the new stepcouple challenges identified which were specifically related to shared parenting, developing a measure specifically for shared parenting challenges categorized around the core shared parenting values is another area for future research. This research could also help identify value violations that are perceived to be the most challenging, and thus potentially the most disruptive to the shared parenting relationship. Identification of these perceived violations could prove useful for clinical or self-treated interventions in the shared parenting relationship for stepcouples. Successful interventions that reframe values violations could have significant positive effects on all members of the shared parenting and stepfamily system.

#### Concluding Remarks

In a departure from previous studies, which explore the shared parenting relationship by looking at the bioparent dyad, this present study locates the stepcouple as central to the inquiry into how this phenomenon is viewed and managed by them. In doing so, this present research expands the shared parenting system to include stepparents and their role in this system. By exploring the conjoint narratives about shared parenting experiences through which the stepcouples socially construct the stepparent's role and their shared parenting reality, new insights are presented which could prove useful for generating new approaches to managing the shared parenting relationship.

This research helps to create a better understanding of the kinds of experiences between shared parenting participants which shape the relationship and contribute to satisfaction with it. By identifying significant communicative events along specific dichotomous dimensions of positivity and negativity, this present study recognizes a meaning-making level of interpretation of these events. The conception that certain significant experiences mean a violation or honoring of core shared parenting relational values provides a distinctive way of viewing shared parenting. There is significant potential for this values-driven view of the shared parenting relationship to generate opportunities for creating turning points through self-monitoring and clinical intervention if an improved relationship is desired. Further development of the theory of shared parenting values expectancy will provide a richer understanding of the shared parenting experience, and, hopefully, new tools that stepcouples or individuals who coparent can use to navigate more effectively the shared parenting relationship.

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## APPENDIX A: STEPCOUPLE CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a study of Stepcouple Cross-household Coparenting. The study is being conducted at the University of Denver by Andrea Smith Sisk. The results of the study will be used to learn more about stepcouples and their experience with communicating with other adults about childrearing issues. The project is being supervised by Dr. Fran Dickson University of Denver, Denver, CO 80208, (303) 871-4318/fdickson@du.edu.

Your participation in the study will take about 80 minutes to complete: approximately 20 minutes to fill out two questionnaires, and 60 minutes for the interview. Participation will involve responding to a number of questions about your marriage, stepfamily dynamics, and cross-household interaction. Your responses will be kept confidential. As part of this study, I request your participation in an in-depth interview. During this interview, I will be asking questions about your experiences and audiotaping our discussion. I may also request to follow-up with an additional interview. Of course, please only answer those questions about which you are comfortable discussing. My part will be to listen as you recreate your experiences and share your understandings and perspectives about your experiences with co-raising children across-households.

My goal is to analyze the materials from your interviews in order to better understand cross-household coparenting for stepcouples. As part of the doctoral research I will use the material from the questionnaires and audio taped interviews for my dissertation, and the material may also be used in subsequent publication as a book, scholarly article, or other publications. In some instances, I may use the material, including Interview transcripts or actual audio excerpts, in teaching and presentations. However, in every instance I will carefully protect your confidentiality and privacy using pseudonyms or similar methods. The audio tapes and other information I collect from you will have no identifying information except for a research number. The code sheet that identifies the research number of the study participant, as well as all the information collected will be kept in separate locked filing cabinets owned by the researcher. Your involvement is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question during the interview and are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Refusal to answer a question or withdrawal from participation involves no penalty.

Although this research does not address the following issues, I am required to inform you that there are two exceptions to the promise of confidentiality. Any information you reveal concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse and neglect may be required by law to be reported to the proper authorities. In addition, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena.

Your participation in this study will contribute valuable knowledge in an area that has not received much attention by researchers. You may enjoy the ability to provide information

about your own experiences. Each couple will also receive a \$20 gift card upon completion of the interview process. If you would like a copy of the results of the study, the researcher will be happy to provide one for you.

There is minimal risk for participating in this research. Potential risks of being involved include the possibility that discussing your stepfamily experiences may be upsetting. If this occurs, and you would like to speak to a counselor, there are many options for finding this support. If you are in the Denver area, the University of Denver Professional Psychology Center (303-871-3626) provides counseling to community members and has a sliding scale for fees. If you are outside the Denver area, the National Mental Health Association (NMHA) Resources Center (1-800-969-6642, [www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org)) can provide information and help in finding community-based mental health services and individual therapists. The 1-800-Therapist Network (1-800-843-7274, [www.1-800-therapist.com](http://www.1-800-therapist.com)) provides referrals to therapists through an international network.

If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated during the research sessions, please feel free to contact Dr. Fran Dickson, or Dr. Dennis Wittmer, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at (303) 871-2431 or Sylk Sotto-Santiago, Office of Sponsored Programs at (303) 871-4052 or write to either at the University of Denver, Office of Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-2121.

Please sign below if you understand and agree to participate.

I have read and understood the foregoing descriptions of the study called Stepcouple Cross-household Coparenting. I have asked for and received a satisfactory explanation of any language that I did not fully understand.

I agree to participate in this study and I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time without penalty. I have received a copy of the consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I agree to be audio taped.

I do not agree to be audio taped.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Please return this completed signature page to the researcher.

APPENDIX B: STEPCOUPLE PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND QUESTIONNAIRE

These questions allow us to know something about the special composition of your family and your experiences in your family. Please provide all the information requested. All furnished information will remain confidential.

Date:

Name:

Email address:

Telephone numbers:

Age:

Gender:

Completed Education:

Annual Household Income:

1. How long have you lived with your current partner?
2. Do you have any biological or adoptive children from your current relationship?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Do you have biological or adopted children from a previous relationship? If not, please skip to question 7. If yes, please indicate the age and gender of each child in the space provided.

|       |       |       |
|-------|-------|-------|
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |

4. On average, how many days in a four week period does/do the child/children) reside with you?  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. When the child is not residing with you, does the child reside with his or her other biological or adoptive parent? If not, with whom does the child live?
6. How many times per month do you communicate with people in the child's other residential household about issues regarding the child?

How many times per month does your spouse communicate with people in the child's other residential household about issues regarding the child?

Who are the people (relationship to child) with whom you or your spouse speak regarding these child-raising issues?

What is the means of this communication (email, telephone, in-person, other)?

Cross-household Coparenting

Rate the following responses according to the extent that they may or may not present a challenge for you in your stepfamily.

1 = no challenge; 2 = slight challenge; 3 = moderate challenge;  
4 = substantial challenge; and 5 = severe challenge

7. \_\_\_\_ Participating in or organizing family events in the context of a stepfamily.
8. \_\_\_\_ Participating in or organizing family events in the context of the extended family (former spouses and their kin, new spouses and their kin).
9. \_\_\_\_ Adapting to the children's schedule for residing with each biological parent.
10. \_\_\_\_ Dealing with legal issues that arise for stepfamilies.
11. \_\_\_\_ Dealing with financial issues that arise for stepfamilies.
12. \_\_\_\_ Operating as a stepfamily in society.
13. \_\_\_\_ Ensuring that the stepparent (you or your spouse) is viewed as a legitimate agent in the children's school environment.
14. \_\_\_\_ Ensuring that the stepparent (you or your spouse) is viewed as a legitimate agent in the children's medical environment.
15. \_\_\_\_ Ensuring that the stepparent's role in the stepfamily is clear.

16. \_\_\_\_ Dealing with the presence of my or my spouse's former partner in my current family life.
17. \_\_\_\_ Dealing with sharing decisions (that affect me and my stepfamily) with my or my spouse's former partner.
18. \_\_\_\_ Dealing with discipline of children in the stepfamily.
19. \_\_\_\_ Respecting the positive feelings the children have for the parent(s) in the other household.
20. \_\_\_\_ Dealing with the negative feelings the children have for the parent(s) in the other household.
21. \_\_\_\_ Accepting that my family is different from that which I had imagined.

Please list the item numbers from above for the five situations you would like most to change. Indicate the degree to which you would like them to change according to the following scale:

2 = change slightly; 3 = change moderately;  
4 = change substantially; and 5 = change enormously

22. Item # \_\_\_\_ . Degree of change desired \_\_\_\_ .
23. Item # \_\_\_\_ . Degree of change desired \_\_\_\_ .
24. Item # \_\_\_\_ . Degree of change desired \_\_\_\_ .
25. Item # \_\_\_\_ . Degree of change desired \_\_\_\_ .
26. Item # \_\_\_\_ . Degree of change desired \_\_\_\_ .



11. Do you and your mate engage in outside interests together?

- All of them
- Some of them
- Very few of them
- None of them

12. In leisure time do you generally prefer:

- To be "on the go,"
- To stay at home?

Does your spouse generally prefer to be "on the go" \_\_\_\_; to stay at home \_\_\_\_?

13. Do you ever wish you had not married?

- Frequently
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never

14. If you had your life to live over, do you think you would:

- Marry the same person
- Marry a different person
- Not marry at all.

15. Do you confide in your mate:

- Almost never
- Rarely
- In most things
- In everything

## APPENDIX D: STEPCOUPLE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### *Warm – up Questions*

1. How did you meet?
2. How long have you been together? If married, when did you get married?
3. What kinds of conversations did you have about merging households?

### *Focus Questions*

4. How do you refer to the other adults co-raising the children (by name?, his ex, kid's dad, etc.)
5. Tell me about your relationship(s) with the other adults co-raising the children.
6. On scale of 1-10 how involved is \_\_\_\_\_ (bio-parent; ex-spouse; stepparent) in parenting decisions that affect your household?
7. What was it like when you (stepparent) first began interacting (if you do) with the ex-spouse (insert name/label)? Has this changed overtime? If so, how?
8. How do you usually communicate across households and about how often does this occur? And, who does most of this communicating? Has this changed over time?
9. How would you characterize (what adjective) the quality of the interactions you have across households?
10. Have the quality of the interactions been the same over time or have they changed? If they have changed, what changed and when did the change occur?

11. Do you ever discuss together a plan for how you will talk to \_\_\_\_\_ (ex-spouse) about child-raising or cross-household communication issues? If so, can you give me an example?
12. Tell me about some of the significant experiences that you (stepcouple) have had with the co-raising parent(s) regarding co-raising the children, particularly those experiences that you have shared with a few other people (family members, friends, etc.)
13. Can you share an example of a negative experience you have had with co-raising across households? A positive experience?
14. On a scale of 1-10 how satisfied are you with interactions you have with him/her/them? Why?
15. What would you like to see change about the interactions/encounters you have with him/her/them? What would you like the interactions to be like?

*Closing Questions*

16. What kind of experiences (advantages or challenges) have you had as a stepfamily that you think may differ from a traditional nuclear family?
17. What kind of experiences (advantages or challenges) have you had as a stepparent/stepcouple that you think may differ from a biological parent/couple?
18. What advice do you have for other stepcouples when it comes to communicating with other adults who are co-raising children?

APPENDIX E: NARRATIVE ANALYSIS CODING FORM

| Case #:<br>Stepfamily type:   | Text | Notes | We-ness |
|---|------|-------|---------|
| How did you meet?   |      |       |         |
| How long have you been together?<br>If married, when did you get married?   |      |       |         |
| What kinds of conversations did you have about merging households?  |      |       |         |
| How do you refer to the other adults co-raising the children (by name?, his ex, kid's dad, etc.)  |      |       |         |
| Tell me about your relationship(s) with the other adults co-raising the children.   |      |       |         |
| On scale of 1-10 how involved is _____ (bio-parent; ex-spouse; stepparent) in parenting decisions that affect your household?                             |      |       |         |
| What was it like when you (stepparent) first began interacting (if you do) with the ex-spouse (insert name/label)? Has this changed overtime? If so, how? |      |       |         |

|   |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|
| <p>How do you usually communicate across households and about how often does this occur? And, who does most of this communicating? Has this changed over time?</p>                    |  |  |  |
| <p>How would you characterize (what adjective) the quality of the interactions you have across households?</p>  |  |  |  |
| <p>Have the quality of the interactions been the same over time or have they changed? If they have changed, what changed and when did the change occur?</p>                           |  |  |  |
| <p>Do you ever discuss together a plan for how you will talk to _____ (ex-spouse) about child-raising or cross-household communication issues? If so, can you give me an example?</p> |  |  |  |

|  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|
| <p>Tell me about some of the significant experiences that you (stepcouple) have had with the co-raising parent(s) regarding co-raising the children, particularly those experiences that you have shared with a few other people (family members, friends, etc.)</p> |  |  |  |
| <p>Can you share an example of a negative experience you have had with co-raising across households? A positive experience?</p>  |  |  |  |
| <p>On a scale of 1-10 how satisfied are you with interactions you have with him/her/them? Why?</p>   |  |  |  |
| <p>What would you like to see change about the interactions/encounters you have with him/her/them? What would you like the interactions to be like?</p>  |  |  |  |

|   |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|
| <p>What kind of experiences (advantages or challenges) have you had as a stepfamily that you think may differ from a traditional nuclear family?</p>          |  |  |  |
| <p>What kind of experiences (advantages or challenges) have you had as a stepparent/stepcouple that you think may differ from a biological parent/couple?</p> |  |  |  |
| <p>What advice do you have for other stepcouples when it comes to communicating with other adults who are co-raising children?</p>                            |  |  |  |

Notes and ideas on:

Processes:

Actions:

Assumptions:

Consequences: