5-2020

"A Lot of Prayer, and Some Wine In-Between": Applying the relational turbulence model to the stepparent-biological parent marriage.

Paul Taylor
East Tennessee State University

Recommended Citation

"A Lot of Prayer, and Some Wine In-Between":

Applying the Relational Turbulence Model to the Stepparent-Biological Parent Marriage

_____

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Communication and Performance

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Communication and Storytelling Studies

_____

by

Paul E. Taylor III

May 2020

_____

Dr. Christine Anzur, Chair

Dr. Amber Kinser

Dr. Kelly Dorgan

ABSTRACT

"A Lot of Prayer, and Some Wine In-Between":

Applying the relational turbulence model to the stepparent-biological parent relationship.

by

Paul E. Taylor III

The present study utilizes the relational turbulence model (RTM) to illuminate stepparent experiences of relational uncertainty and partner interference within the context of the stepparent-biological parent marriage. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with 6 stepparents revealed four primary themes pertaining to how stepparents experienced relational uncertainty: (a) enactment of parenting, (b) competing expectations, (c) shifts in attitude and behavior by spouse, and (d) differences between marriage partners. Interference from partners was experienced by stepparents in relation to the enactment of parenting and the maintaining of the marriage as an intimate relationship.

DEDICATION

To my amazing daughter, Ashlynn, who provided me with unspoken motivation to attend college

and countless hours of quiet time to continue my pursuit. Through her strength of character, I

was provided with the necessary tools and encouraged to succeed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my thesis committee chair, Dr. Christine Anzur. Without your special blend of guidance and freedom, I doubt this project could have come to fruition. Thank you also to Dr. Amber Kinser and Dr. Kelly Dorgan for accepting positions on my committee, supporting me, and showing me respect as a fellow researcher. And thank you also to Dr. Andrew Herrmann, Dr. Delana Reed, Molly Cantor, and Nancy Donoval. Together, you all showed me kindness in my academic pursuits and encouraged me to continue questioning the world around me.

Thank you to my teacher, friend, colleague, and honorary family member Dr. Richard Merritt. You were my first college professor and incidentally introduced me to my path in college and life, provided me with confidence, and always treated me as an equal. I will never forget the expression on your face when I told you I did not expect you to give me credit for the assignments I was handing in late, but that I wanted to hand them in anyway. Thank you for not only allowing me to be myself but for accepting me as I am. Thank you also to my wonderful friend, and Dr. Merritt's wonderful wife, Maureen Merritt. You have relentlessly kept me in your thoughts and made me feel truly valuable.

Thank you to Glenna Cullup, Dr. Xiaoping Wang, and the entire Department of Behavior and Social Sciences at Northeast State Community College. You provided me with a supportive family in education and always made me feel welcome.

Thank you to my cohort, Donna Paulsen, Dallas Lay, Abigail Lewis, Isaac Price, and Joshua Whitehead, and my fellow students Sarah Trent, Alana Claxton, Kallie Gay, and Racheal McCausland for all your help, guidance, and encouragement. I will always cherish our moments inside and outside of class and the energy each of you brought to my graduate school experience.

Thank you to my family, Beatrice Taylor, Tammy Casbeer, Jerry Casbeer, Victoria Casbeer, Timothy Giardina, David Wright, and Illise Wright for always being supportive and acting interested in my education. Even when you did not understand a single thing I was talking about, you did a great job of pretending to care and that is all I could ever hope for in a family.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1. Introduction

The existence of households with at least one stepparent has become a mainstay in American society. The most recent data suggests that approximately "40% of all married couples with children in the United States are stepcouples… meaning that at least one partner has a child from a previous relationship before marriage" (Marriage, Family, & Stepfamily Statistics, 2019, para. 2). This equates to approximately 1.3 million households (National Stepfamily Day, 2018). Additionally, the combined data of adults and children estimate that a staggering over 113 million Americans have a steprelationship of some form or fashion.

The current statistics are likely to hold steady for a while to come. According to the American Psychological Association (Marriage and Divorce, n.d.) "more than 90 percent of people marry by age 50; however, about 40 to 50 percent of married couples in the United States divorce." (para. 1) The peak time for divorce has been identified as the third year of marriage (Thompson, 2008) and, unfortunately, "the divorce rate for subsequent marriages is even higher" (Marriage and Divorce, n.d., para. 2). This means that there is a steady cycle of marriage and divorce in the US which creates increasingly fertile ground for the growth of stepfamilies and, subsequently, a rise in the number of stepparents in today's society. The application of the relational turbulence model to the stepparent experience is a unique way of exploring the elements of the stepparent-biological parent relationship that can create varying degrees of uncertainty for stepparents within their marriage and let those elements and experiences be known.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

There are many factors that influence the operation and subsequent success or failure of a stepfamily. They are "complex systems, made up of interrelated subsystems" (Jensen, 2017, p. 1053). As such, the operations of stepfamilies can only be effectively analyzed using a multi-faceted approach. What follows will be a discussion of current knowledge pertaining to theories used in past research and the theoretical framework of this study, the specific roles adopted by each stepparent, the influence of gender on the stepfamily, parenting behaviors by stepparents individually and in connection with their spouse, and the influence of parenting on the marriage between the stepparent and the biological parent.

Families are "complex systems, made up of interdependent and interrelated subsystems" (Jensen, 2017 p. 1053) therefore, "an understanding of stepfamily functioning can be optimized when features of multiple individuals and relationships are examined together" (Jensen, 2017 p. 1053). A myriad of theories has been used to analyze the dynamics of stepfamily life and the various types of relationships that exist within them. Researchers have used systems theory (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004; Egeren & Hawkins, 2004; Jensen & Ganong, 2019; Jensen & Shafer, 2013; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011; Speer & Trees, 2007; Jensen, 2017), interdependence theory (Campbell, Butzer, & Wong, 2008; Jensen & Ganong, 2019; Schrodt, 2011), conflict theory (Jensen, 2017), and a long list of others. Research has been conducted both quantitatively and qualitatively in the hopes of gaining a better understanding of the complexities of stepfamily life. The purpose of this research is to analyze the stepparent-biological parent relationship through the lens of the relational turbulence model (RTM; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004) in the hopes of gaining a better understanding of how stepparents experience uncertainty and how that uncertainty affects the stepparent-biological parent relationship. Like all theories, in

order to get a firm understanding of the theory and its application, an in-depth explanation is necessary.

Relational Turbulence Model

The relational turbulence model (RTM) is a derivative of uncertainty reduction theory, however, it has some unique components. The RTM positions relational uncertainty and partner interference as precursors to the experience of relational turbulence, a global perception of instability and turmoil (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004) and focuses more on why turbulence happens rather than on when turbulence happens (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010). Relational uncertainty "has elements that are both context-free and context-dependent" (Knobloch, Sharabi, Delaney, & Suranne, 2016, p. 28) and "constitutes a lack of confidence about how an interpersonal encounter will proceed" (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999, p. 262), mainly involving an individual's "inability to describe, explain, and predict" (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999, p. 262) their own behavior as well as that of their relationship partner. However, whereas uncertainty reduction theory encompasses the "full spectrum of doubts that are relevant to interpersonal interaction" (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a. p. 458), its primary application has been in initial interaction and emerging relationships. This is where uncertainty reduction theory and the relational turbulence model start to deviate from one another, as the RTM was created specifically for use in intimate relationships (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004).

A highly influential factor in the ability to productively manage relationship uncertainty and turbulence is intimacy (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). Intimacy is the level of closeness experienced by individuals within the relationship and, as such, can greatly impact assessments of uncertainty and communication patterns. Research shows that high levels of intimacy can have both positive and negative effects on a relationship (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). Partners

experiencing high levels of intimacy report less negative appraisals of the attitudes and behaviors of their partners (Scheinfeld & Worley, 2018; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Theiss & Knobloch, 2009; Theiss & Solomon, 2006); however, high levels of intimacy (Solomon and Knobloch, 2001) have also been linked to increases in the level of negative emotion toward potential disruptions to the development longevity of the relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Theiss & Knobloch, 2009). These negative emotions may lead to an increase in relationship uncertainty overall. The negative emotions have also been linked to a decrease in effective communication patterns (Knobloch & Solomon, 2005) because partners may fear losing "valuable investments" (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a. p. 473) in the relationship and potentially changing the relationship permanently (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a). In stepfamilies, these unproductive patterns of communication can manifest themselves as avoidance of topics such as parenting (Baxter et al., 2004; Bulcroft et al., 1998; Marsiglio, 2004; Schrodt, 2011), issues that arise with the partner (Campbell et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2017), or external issues that impact the operation of the stepfamily (Baxter et al., 2004; Ganong et al., 1999; Schrodt, 2011).

The RTM was originally posited for use in relationships that exist at moderate to high levels of intimacy (Solomon and Knobloch, 2001; Solomon & Knoboch, 2004); and its major components are (a) relational uncertainty and (b) partner interference, which work in unison to create relational turbulence. Relationships are constantly met with experiences that can cause uneasiness and confusion (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004) and relational uncertainty involves people's questions about the "norms for appropriate behaviors within the relationship, mutuality of feelings between partners, definition of the association, and future of the relationship" (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a, p. 245) and is "the degree of

confidence people have in their perceptions of involvement within interpersonal relationships"
(Solomon & Knobloch, 2004, p. 797). Relational uncertainty exists at the level of self, partner,
and relationship uncertainty. When feelings of relational uncertainty are accompanied by the
perception that one's partner is interfering with an individual's ability to achieve a desired goal
regarding the relationship, turbulence can arise (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Turbulence is the
state of turmoil characterized by heightened levels of relational uncertainty and the presence of
interference within the context of the relationship. As such, those experiencing relational
turbulence are more likely to react in a more emotional manner, often times presenting negative
or counterproductive attitudes, behaviors, or communication patterns (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010;
Scheinfeld & Worley, 2018; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004).

  Self-uncertainty. Self-uncertainty relates to the questions and doubts someone may have
regarding their own involvement in the relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999; Solomon &
Knobloch, 2004). From within the relationship, individuals evaluate their attitudes and behaviors
toward the relationship in terms of the desire they have for the relationship, the worth of the
relationship to them, and their individual goals for the progression of the relationship (Knobloch
& Solomon, 2002b). As such, if the individual struggles with describing, predicting, or
explaining any of those behaviors to themselves then that individual is experiencing self-
uncertainty (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999).

  In the realm of stepfamilies, there are a plethora of opportunities for an individual to
experience self-uncertainty. Stepchildren can experience self-uncertainty when trying to
understand their identity and role as a stepchild (Ganong et al., 2018; Mikucki-Enyart et al.,
2017) their role as a sibling or stepsibling (Speer & Trees, 2007), or are asked to defend parental
loyalties (Ganong et al., 1999; Ganong et al., 2011). Stepparents may experience self-uncertainty

in their position as both a stepparent and/or a spouse. In the role of stepparent, areas such as parental motivation (Schmeeckle, 2007; Weaver & Coleman, 2005), level of involvement (Miller et al., 2017), and discipline (Baxter et al., 2004; Ganong et al., 2011; Jensen, 2011) can all be sources of self-uncertainty, however, in the role of spouse, areas of informational gatekeeping (Jensen & Ganong, 2019; Ganong et al., 1999), parenting (Egeren & Hawkins, 2004; Feinburg et al., 2007; Schrodt, 2011), and spousal support (Baxter et al., 2004; Miller et al., 2017; Patrick et al., 2007) can all be potential sources of self-uncertainty.

Partner-uncertainty. Partner-uncertainty relates to the questions and doubts an individual has about their relationship partner (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Partner-uncertainty emerges from an individual's inability to predict the attitudes and behaviors of their relationship partner within the context of the relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999) and, similar to self-uncertainty, revolves around the assessment of three content areas: the partner's desire for the relationship, the partner's consideration of the worth of the relationship, and the partners' goals for the progression of the relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b).

Within stepfamily relationships, the stepparent can experience partner-uncertainty within the context of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Loyalties toward biological parents, both residential and non-residential, can create situations where stepparents become uncertain about the role the stepchild wants them to enact (Ganong et al., 1999; Ganong et al., 2011; Jensen & Shafer, 2013; Schmeeckle, 2007) but it is more likely that stepparents will experience uncertainty with their spouse as a result of coparenting issues (DeGarmo et al., 2008; Egeren & Hawkins, 2004; Schrodt, 2011) or a lack of spousal support (Miller et al., 2017; Patrick et al., 2007).

Relationship-uncertainty. Relationship uncertainty "exists at a higher order of abstraction than either self or partner uncertainty because it embodies ambiguity about the dyad as a unit" (as cited in Solomon & Knobloch, 2004, p, 797) and not the specific individuals within it. Relationship uncertainty relates to the questions and doubt an individual has about the relationship as a whole (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004) and is examined by individuals in the relationship in terms of the societal "norms for appropriate behavior, the mutuality of feelings between the partners, the definition of the association, and the potential future of the relationship" (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a, p. 245).

Besides existing as a more abstract concept, there are a few more differentiating characteristics between relationship uncertainty and self- and partner-uncertainty. "Whereas self and partner uncertainty exist independently, either may be sufficient to provoke doubts about the state of the relationship" (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999, p. 273). However, just because either may be sufficient to provoke doubts, neither are required to experience relationship uncertainty. In some cases, individuals can have doubts concerning the relationship without experiencing either self- or partner-uncertainty because relationship uncertainty can be more directly related to unexpected events and key turning points in the relationship (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Another difference between relationship uncertainty and self- and partner-uncertainty is the effect it can have on an individual's overall perception of the relationship.

Relationship uncertainty can have a compounding effect on the levels of uncertainty experienced by individuals within the relationship and can intensify people's reactions to relationship events (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Individuals who experience both relationship and partner-uncertainty view partner interference as "more serious and more threatening to their relationships" (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004, p. 811) and give more negative emotional energy to

unexpected events (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a). Unfortunately, reducing relationship uncertainty is not a simple process, because even though relationship uncertainty can exist without self- and partner-uncertainty, in cases where it does not, "both self-focused and partner-focused doubts must be resolved before relationship uncertainty can be reduced" (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999, p. 273) suggesting that the reduction of relational uncertainty is a key component of happy, enduring relationships.

Partner Interference. In addition to the experience of relational uncertainty, a person's perception of interference by their partner is highly influential to a relationship and an essential component for the experience of relational turbulence (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Partner interference is the perception and belief that the actions of the relationship partner specifically interfere with an individual's ability to achieve desired goals for the relationship (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Any action that makes it difficult for partners to coordinate their actions could be considered partner interference (Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2017) meaning it could be anything from a disruption to daily routines such as diet and exercise plans (Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2017) to impeding coparenting efforts (Feinburg et al., 2007; Schrodt, 2011) or even gatekeeping behaviors (Marsiglio, 2004). Regardless of the type, any interference from a relationship partner can lead to negative feelings, doubts, and uncertainty about the partner's attitude and behavior regarding the relationship (Campbell et al., 2008; Egeren & Hawkins, 2004; Jensen & Ganong, 2019).

The elements of relational uncertainty and partner interference are the core structures of the relational turbulence model. As stated earlier, individuals characterize their relational uncertainty in terms of self-uncertainty, partner-uncertainty, or relationship-uncertainty (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004) but it is the combination of

relational uncertainty and perceptions of partner interference that create episodes of relational turbulence (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010; Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). Each form of uncertainty, self-, partner-, and relationship-, can be analyzed separately, but it is important to understand that often times they overlap and are influenced by each other, and therefore can be complicated to differentiate. A key factor influencing an individual's ability to productively manage relationship uncertainty is the level of dependency, or interdependence, within the relationship (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001; Theiss & Solomon, 2006). Whereas a dependent relationship is characterized by one partner being almost entirely reliant on the other partner for behavioral cues, interdependence is "defined as the coordination of mutually beneficial systems of behavior between partners" (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004, p. 798). To efficiently navigate relationship turmoil, both relationship partners need to have a firm understanding of the expected level of interdependence within the relationship. An inability to effectively negotiate interdependence within the relationship could lead to relationship partners overstepping ambiguous boundaries and could influence and interfere with the partner and the relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 2005; Theiss & Solomon, 2006). The resulting interference can interrupt the partner's routines and potentially hinder each other's ability to achieve their personal objectives (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010; Solomon & Knobloch, 2001) which could negatively affect the individual's assessment of the partner's behavior (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004) and ultimately create uncertainty about the partner and the relationship.

Reducing uncertainty in relationships, particularly close relationships, is a complicated process. If uncertainty is created through the existence of doubts and an individual's inability to gain answers to questions they have about themselves, their partner, or the relationship, then it would stand to reason that the best way to reduce uncertainty would be through communication

(Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b; Lederman, Bodenmann, Rudaz, & Bradbury, 2010; Thompson, 2008); however, it is not as simple as it sounds. Communication within relationships is influenced by a variety of variables. Intimacy (Patrick et al., 2007; Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b; Solomon and Knobloch, 2001; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004) and power (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b; Marsiglio, 2004; Schmeeckle, 2007) are two elements of a relationship that are highly influential over communication patterns between partners. Power and intimacy are connected with both verbal and nonverbal communication (Fincham, 2003; Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b; Solomon and Knobloch, 2001; Theiss & Solomon, 2006) and can influence both open (Ledermann et al., 2010) and closed communication patterns (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b; Theiss & Solomon, 2006; Thompson, 2008).

Power differentials in relationships come in a couple different forms. Simply put, interpersonal power is the type and degree of influence one partner exerts over the other partner in the relationship, and can be delineated into two main categories, dependence power and punitive power, both of which emerges from the ability to control a partner's relationship experience (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b). Dependence power is gained when a relationship partner is the sole controller of a particular element of the relationship, therefore forcing the other partner to follow the guidelines set forth to them. In stepfamilies, this could manifest as the biological parent controlling the stepparent's direct access to the stepchild (Miller et al., 2017) or access to information about the stepchild (Schmeeckle, 2007). Punitive power is slightly different because it centers around the ability of one partner to deliver punishments or other negative feedback to the other partner for actions outside their prescribed guidelines. In stepfamilies, this could be manifested as a stepparent threatening to restrict financial support to the stepchild (Marsiglio, 2004; Schmeeckle, 2007) or the biological parent threatening to limit

the stepparent's disciplinary influence (Baxter et al., 2004; Fine et al., 1997; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). Regardless of how power is exercised, research has shown that when stepparents perceive their relationship partner as having more power, they are more prone to assess their partner's behaviors negatively and avoid certain topics of conversation (Knobloch et al., 2016; Theiss & Solomon, 2006), thus contributing to the experiences of uncertainty for the stepparent (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b).

Intimacy affects communication patterns in ways similar to power differentials (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b; Solomon and Knobloch, 2001). As stated earlier, intimacy is the level of closeness experienced by individuals within the relationship which can have both positive and negative effects on communication patterns. While many people believe the best way to improve a relationship is to foster quality communication through openness and disclosure (Allen, Baucom, Burnett, Epstein & Ranking-Esquer, 2001; Thompson, 2008; Robinson & Blanton, 1993), that does not mean that fostering positive communication is inherently easy or always beneficial. Research has shown that there are potential consequences of being open with a relationship partner (Fitzpatrick, Fallis & Vance, 1982; Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b).

Communication is paramount when trying to reduce uncertainty in relationships, but sometimes the most influential decision made by one partner in the relationship is deciding when not to speak (Fitzpatrick et al., 1982). Sometimes a partner's openness can unveil fundamental differences between the partners that could threaten the future of the relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b). However it is also understood that communication is the key (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b; Knobloch & Solomon, 2005; Marks, Hopkins, Chaney, Monroe, Nesteruk, & Sasser, 2008; Sandberg, Miller, & Harper, 2002; Stith, Amanor, Miller, Menhusen, Morgan, &

18

Few-Dewo, 2011) to reducing uncertainty in relationships and, if executed efficiently, can promote positive outcomes for the individuals and the relationship.

Effective and productive communication can be a positive influence on close relationships and offer several benefits to the relationship partners. Some benefits of effective communication are increased intimacy (Robinson & Blanton, 1993; Solomon and Knobloch, 2001; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004), improved feelings of closeness (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b), and a more prosperous relationship overall (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b; Schneewind & Gerhard, 2002). Productive communication patterns can provide relationship partners with useful tools for managing conflict with each other (Egeren & Hawkins, 2004; Feinburg et al., 2007; Patrick et al., 2007) defining and navigating their identity and role as a parent or stepparent (Ganong et al., 2018; Schrodt, 2011), and handling parental responsibilities (Ganong et al., 1999; Gold & Adeyemi, 2013; Schrodt, Baxter, McBride, Braithwaite, & Fine, 2006; Weaver & Coleman, 2005).

In summary, the RTM posits that intimate relationships may occasionally suffer from periods of increased relational uncertainty. This relational uncertainty, in the form of self-, partner-, and relationship-uncertainty, may lead individuals to feel unable to predict or understand the attitude and behavior of their self and their partner in the relationship (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Coupled with an individual's perception of partner interference (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010), heightened levels of relational uncertainty will promote turbulence concerning the relationship. The RTM has been applied to many contexts; however, the focus of this thesis is on stepparents' experiences of turbulence within their spousal relationships.

Stepfamilies and Stepparenting

Stepfamilies are simplistic only in terms of pattern and definition (Jensen, 2017). Stepfamilies are created when an individual builds a relationship with a partner who already has a child from a previous marriage or relationship (Jensen, Lippold, Mills-Koonce, & Fosco, 2018; Jensen & Shafer, 2013). This new relationship can be created either through cohabitation or marriage with an individual from a child's family of origin, thus creating a dual-parent household (Fine, Ganong, & Coleman, 1997; Meteyer & Perry-Jenkins, 2009; Spruijt & de Goede, 1997).

Although prominent in the landscape of American society, the existence of stepfamilies is complex. Adding another layer to the complexity of stepfamilies is the fact that a child's family of origin is no longer only thought of in terms of biology, meaning that a child could be either biologically related or bound by adoption to their parent(s). However, "the biological nuclear family is an example of what Foucault referred to as a constructed ideal that is accorded a truth status" and, as such, has "a normalizing effect in that they produce norms around which people feel obligated to conform" (Jones, 2003,p. 229). As a result, stepfamilies suffer from high levels of uncertainty as the "normative standards couched within cultural, social, and legal systems" (Marsiglio, 2004, p. 23) of American society perpetuates the formation and use of negative statements and images (Miller, Cartwright, & Gibson, 2017) toward stepfamilies and, more specifically, stepparents (Miller et al., 2017; Sanner & Coleman, 2017; Shapiro, 2014).

Regardless of the negative stigma (Jones, 2003) given to stepfamilies, men and women are still becoming stepparents. Research supports the idea that "those more experienced with alternative family forms in childhood and who have children of their own, whether coresidential or not, are significantly more willing to enter a union with a partner who has children"

(Goldscheider & Kaufman, 2006, p. 1427). Additionally, individuals who already have children of their own may be "more open to marrying someone else with children" (Goldscheider & Kaufman, 2006, p. 1419) even though they understand the potential influence the stepchild and other biological parent may have on the relationship (Bulcroft et al., 1998; Ganong, Coleman, Chapman, & Jamison, 2018; Gold & Adeyemi, 2013; Jensen et al., 2018; Jensen & Ganong, 2019; Jensen & Shafer, 2013; Marsiglio, 2004; Schrodt, 2011). Becoming a stepparent necessitates consideration of two key elements of family life: stepparent roles and parenting behaviors. Both of these elements have the potential to cause disruption and uncertainty for stepparents.

Stepparent roles. A highly influential element of uncertainty in stepparent-biological parent relationship is a strong understanding of each person's role. Speer and Trees (2007) state that "role negotiation in stepfamilies in an important process that involves and affects all family members." (p. 377) And it is only through effective communication that the role of each individual can be determined, adopted, and enacted. To understand how an individual may respond to a specific role, it is important to understand that "there are two aspects of the cognitive dimension of a role: the content of the role and the clarity of the role" (Fine et al., 1997, p. 503). "The content of the role refers to the beliefs about how the role should be enacted, whereas the clarity of the role refers to individuals' level of certainty that their beliefs about the content are appropriate for the given role" (Fine et al., 1997, p. 503). Discrepancies between the two portions can lead role ambiguity (Knobloch & Solomon, 2005; Speer & Trees, 2007) and ultimately to self-uncertainty.

Role ambiguity in the partnership is when an individual is "unsure of what emotions and/or behaviors they are expected to exhibit in a given situation" (as cited in Speer & Trees,

2007, p. 381). As such, it is understandable that overcoming that ambiguity has been identified

as one of the primary tasks for stepparents in attaining personal and family satisfaction

(Knobloch & Solomon, 2005; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). Although there are some differences

about role expectations from the children and role expectations from the partner (Baxter et al.,

2004), there is some overlap. In connection with the children in the relationship, each partner

may, at times, see themselves as a friend (Jensen, 2011), an active parent (Fine et al., 1997), or as

an outsider (Baxter et al., 2004; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). However, as a relationship partner,

uncertainty can be experienced by the stepparent from issues of expected involvement with the

stepchild (Ganong et al., 1999; Speer & Trees, 2007; Weaver & Coleman, 2005), level of support

provided by their partner (Baxter et al., 2004; Ganong et al., 2011; Speer & Trees, 2007), or

acceptance from the non-residential biological parent (Baxter et al., 2004; Schrodt, 2011).

Previous experiences with family structures can also influence the amount of uncertainty

experienced by stepparents. Although it has been found that "those who have experienced family

disruptions and stepfamilies in their childhood will be more willing to form these types of

families as adults" (Goldscheider & Kaufman, 2006, p. 1419), that does not shield them from

experiencing uncertainty with their relationship partner. Issues such as educational level,

preconceived notions about the permanency of marriage, and ability to hold a steady job

(Goldscheider & Kaufman, 2006; Jensen & Ganong, 2019) are all factors that can create tension

in the relationship and leave stepparents feeling uncertain about themselves, their partner and the

relationship as a whole.

Gendered norms are also highly influential to the experience of uncertainty in stepparent-

biological parent relationships. Since gendered norms "influence families in general, the

experiences of individuals in mother-stepfather families and father-stepmother families can differ

markedly" (as cited in Jensen & Ganong, 2019, p.5). As a result, to reduce uncertainty communication needs to be open between the relationship partners about what each expects from the other (Fine et al., 1997; Ganong et al., 1999; Ganong et al., 2011; Goldscheider & Kaufman, 2006; Schrodt, 2011; Weaver & Coleman, 2005) because researchers have found that without adequate communication between the partners, prevailing societal gendered norms become adopted (Miller et al., 2017) which may cause turbulence (Schmeeckle, 2007; Shapiro, 2014) in the relationship and feelings of self-, partner-, and relationship uncertainty.

Stepmothers experience the most stress in relation to gendered norms than both stepfathers and either biological parent (Feinburg et al., 2007; Shapiro, 2014; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). Social expectations for stepmothers are similar to those of biological mothers (Miller et al., 2017; Sanner & Coleman, 2017; Weaver & Coleman, 2005), however, stepmothers are not allowed to experience motherhood in the same way (Miller et al., 2017; Sanner & Coleman, 2017; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). Research has shown that stepmothers are supposed to care for and nurture children (Gold & Adeyemi, 2013; Miller et al., 2017; Weaver & Coleman, 2005) and often encouraged to adopt a *kinkeeper* role by their partner (Schmeeckle, 2007; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011; Weaver & Coleman, 2005) but ultimately end up receiving conflicted or limited support from the biological mother and/or their relationship partner (Schmeeckle, 2007; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). The combination of societal and relationship expectations and insufficient support for their role as a stepmother can create a significant amount of self-, partner-, and relationship-uncertainty if not managed effectively through communication among the relationship partners.

Similar to stepmothers, stepfathers experience a great deal of stress in connection to their role in the stepfamily (Marsiglio, 2004; Miller, 2010). "Stepfathering is a complex role" (Shapiro

& Stewart, 2011, p. 534) that has been complicated farther by the existence of stereotypes labeling men as having an "inaptitude" (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011, p. 534) for parenting (Miller, 2010; Miller et al., 2017; Weaver & Coleman, 2005) and a primary role of financial provider (Ganong et al., 1999; Schmeeckle, 2007). However, although "parenting is still considered largely woman's work" (DeGarmo et al., 2008, p. 36), Schenck et al. (2009) consider the roles of the *21st-century* father to be very different from what it used to be. Unfortunately, a shift in the definition of what it means to be a father in today's society is not enough to shield stepfathers from experiencing uncertainty. Stepfathers who attempt to adopt the more recent ideals of stepfathering (Goldscheider & Kaufman, 2006; Miller, 2010) and relationship dynamics by taking a more active parenting role or more open form of communication (Ledermann et al., 2010) with their partner may experience self-uncertainty and/or partner-uncertainty if it is deemed unacceptable by their partner (Patrick et al., 2007; Ganong et al., 2018; Gold & Adeyemi, 2013) that could eventually lead to feelings of relationship-uncertainty.

When discussing turbulence in stepparent-biological parent relationships, conflict over parenting behaviors cannot be ignored. Conflict over parenting efforts have been positively linked to adolescent antisocial behavior (Feinburg et al., 2007), parental negativity (Feinburg et al., 2007; Jensen et al., 2018), and can affect a relationship partner's assessment of their relationship (Campbell et al., 2008; Egeren & Hawkins, 2004; Marsiglio, 2004; Meteyer & Perry-Jenkins, 2009; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). In-depth coverage of the different forms of parenting is not needed for the purposes of this research, so this review will only cover how parenting behaviors can be linked with experiences of self-, partner-, and relationship uncertainty.

Parenting Behaviors. Parenting as it relates to RTM is not an analysis of what style works best but rather how each style can affect feelings of uncertainty. Stepparent-biological parent relationships where both individuals manage parenting responsibilities together and effectively have been linked to more positive outcomes for the children (Meteyer & Perry-Jenkins, 2009), increased personal and relationship satisfaction (Fine et al., 1997; Gold & Adeyemi, 2013; Schrodt, 2011), and of course the opposite is also true in that relationships where parenting is not handled effectively there exists more turbulence (Jensen & Ganong, 2019; Ganong et al., 1999; Ganong et al., 2018; Gold & Adeyemi, 2013) leading to increased levels of self-, partner-, and relationship-uncertainty. This turbulence can come in the form of disagreements about how to parent (Feinburg et al., 2007; Ganong et al., 2011; Schrodt et al., 2006) or issues concerning the other biological parent (Jensen et al., 2018; Schrodt, 2011).

Disagreements about how to parent can cause a significant amount of turbulence in stepparent-biological parent relationships (Miller et al., 2017). "Researchers have demonstrated that the coparenting relationship is central to family functioning and is predictive of adult's adjustment in post-divorce families" (as cited in Schrodt, 2011, p. 987). Unfortunately, a lack of communication or ineffective communication (Knobloch et al., 2016) patterns can often put the biological parent and stepparent on different sides of parenting issues (Miller et al., 2017; Schrodt, 2011) which can be not only counterproductive to parenting efforts but also potentially detrimental to the child (Feinburg et al., 2007).

Parenting is a multi-faceted arena where issues arise and morph on a continuous basis. Concepts such as discipline (Marsiglio, 2004; Miller et al., 2017; Weaver & Coleman, 2005), how much control or independence a child should have (Bulcroft et al., 1998), who has the authority to make decisions concerning the child (Bulcroft et al., 1998; Weaver & Coleman,

2005), how much warmth and friendliness to provide the child with (Fine et. al., 1997; Ganong et al., 1999; Ganong et al., 2011), and the correct amount of distance and closeness to exercise with the child (Baxter et al., 2004; Ganong et al., 1999; Ganong et al., 2011; Speer & Trees, 2007) are all issues that require effective communication in order for the stepparent to effectively navigate them. However, if the communication over these issues is deficient in the stepparent-biological parent relationship then turbulence is created and the stepparent can experience self-, partner-, and relationship-uncertainty.

The focus of this research is utilize RTM as a means of exploring how stepparents experience uncertainty. However, it must first be understood how the concepts of RTM can be applied specifically to the exploration and examination of the stepparent-biological parent relationship. Turbulence in a relationship can be created by a variety of tumultuous experiences (Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2017; Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a) and relational transitions (Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2017) that occur in relationships. In the realm of stepfamilies, turbulence can be the result of societal pressure (Marsiglio, 2004; Miller et al., 2017), tension in the stepparent-stepchild relationship (Ganong et al., 2018; Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999), tension between the partners (Feinburg, Kan, & Hetherington, 2007; Jensen & Ganong, 2019; Patrick, Sells, Giordano, & Tollerud, 2007), outside influence from other biological family members (Baxter et al., 2004; DeGarmo, Patras, & Eap, 2008; Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011; Speer & Trees, 2007), or a host of other experiences both anticipated and unanticipated which have been linked negative and pessimistic views of the relationship, negative emotions, and unproductive communication patterns (as cited in Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2017) .

Overall, the context of stepparenting seems to be one in which relational uncertainty and partner interference seem likely to be present. That is the core idea behind the decision to apply

RTM to the stepparent-biological parent relationship. This research should result in increased insight and better understanding of how uncertainty and turbulence are experienced and managed on the part of the stepparent.

RTM and Stepparenting. Stepparent-biological parent relationships are a balancing act similar to every marriage (Baxter et al., 2004) but made even more complicated because the stepparent is entering into a pre-made family with established rules (Baxter et al., 2004; Marsiglio, 2004; Speer & Trees, 2007) and communication patterns and, as a result, enters the situation with the status of an *outsider* (Baxter et al., 2004; Schrodt, 2011). The *outsider* status can make it difficult for stepparents to integrate into the family (Ganong et al., 1999; Speer & Trees, 2007) and without effective communication with the biological parent can generate feelings of uncertainty (Baxter et al., 2004; Egeren & Hawkins, 2004; Knobloch et al., 2016; Schmeeckle, 2007).

As discussed earlier, there are a variety of issues that can cause a stepparent to experience uncertainty. The two most influential issues surrounding a stepparent's experience with uncertainty are incongruities in parenting styles (Egeren & Hawkins, 2004; Feinburg et al., 2007; Jensen & Ganong, 2019) and role expectations (Ganong et al., 1999; Jensen et al., 2018; Jones, 2003; Marsiglio, 2004). Singularly or together, these two elements of the stepparent-biological parent relationship can lead to significant amount of relational uncertainty and interference, ultimately resulting in the experience of turbulence.

Self-uncertainty. According to RTM, self-uncertainty relates to the questions and doubts an individual has about their own involvement in the relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Stepmothers and stepfathers can both experience self-uncertainty in connection with their role as a stepparent and relationship partner but not always in the same way (Campbell et al., 2008; Gold & Adeyemi, 2013; Goldscheider & Kaufman, 2006; Miller, 2010; Schmeeckle, 2007; Weaver & Coleman, 2005).

Self-uncertainty for stepmothers can be created as a result of misunderstood expectations. Stepmothers are saddled with a plethora of societal expectations (Miller et al., 2017; Sanner & Coleman, 2017; Weaver & Coleman, 2005), some of which may also be the expectations of their stepchild (Baxter et al., 2004; Jensen & Ganong, 2019) and the biological parent (Campbell et al., 2008; Egeren & Hawkins, 2004; Patrick et al., 2007). However, unlike stepfathers, stepmothers experience the most negative stereotype surrounding stepparents -- the stereotype of the *wicked stepmother* (Miller et al., 2017; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). The stereotype of the *wicked stepmother* (Miller et al., 2017; Weaver & Coleman, 2005), combined with miscommunicated expectations from the biological parent, can often create a no-win situation for stepmothers (Miller et al., 2017; Sanner & Coleman, 2017; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). If the biological parent does not effectively communicate their expectations (Egeren & Hawkins, 2004) regarding the roles of *kinkeeper* (Schmeeckle, 2007), caregiver (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011; Weaver & Coleman, 2005), mediator (Jensen & Ganong, 2019) or any other specific role, confusion can arise. Ultimately, the stepmother would feel uncertain about her responsibilities (Bulcroft et al., 1998; Feinburg et al., 2007; Jensen & Ganong, 2019; Schrodt et al., 2006), influence (Bulcroft et al., 1998; Ganong et al., 1999; Jensen & Ganong, 2019), and role in the stepfamily (Baxter et al., 2004; Schrodt, 2011; Weaver & Coleman, 2005).

Self-uncertainty for stepfathers typically comes in the form of misunderstood expectations. If either the stepchild or the biological parent communicates disapproval with a behavior enacted by the stepfather or prevents the stepfather from gaining valuable information or insights (Marsiglio, 2004; Schmeeckle, 2007; Schrodt, 2011), that can create turbulence and confusion. This can cause the stepfather to question the accuracy and legitimacy of their behavior and their role as a stepparent and relationship partner. The resulting feelings of uncertainty are compounded if there is poor communication with the biological parent or if the stepfather already experiences incongruities between the role prescribed to him by society (Ganong et al., 1999; Jones, 2003; Miller, 2010; Miller et al., 2017; Schmeeckle, 2007; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011; Weaver & Coleman, 2005), the communicated expectations of the biological parent (Baxter et al., 2004; Campbell et al., 2008; Egeren & Hawkins, 2004; Feinburg et al., 2007; Marsiglio, 2004; Patrick et al., 2007), and the role he wishes to adopt as a stepfather (Goldscheider & Kaufman, 2006; Miller, 2010; Schrodt, 2011).

In accordance with RTM, self-uncertainty for stepparents within their marriage is when the factors discussed previously leave the stepparent feeling uncertain about their position as a spouse and/or stepparent (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Research has shown that relationships that are characterized by high levels of ambiguity (Knobloch & Solomon, 2005), encourage more negative appraisals (Scheinfeld & Worley, 2018) of the partners actions by the stepparent, a decrease in intimacy levels (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001), and an increase in feelings of uncertainty for the stepparent. Collectively, the combination of these factors have also been found to decrease effective communication (Knobloch et al., 2016) between the marriage partners which negatively impacts the ability of the marriage partners to reduce uncertainty.

Partner-uncertainty. According to RTM, partner-uncertainty relates to the questions and doubts an individual has about their relationship partner (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Partner uncertainty can be closely linked with self-uncertainty if the self-uncertainty is generated by the behavior of the relationship partner; however, the difference may lie in the difference between the partner's inability to communicate effectively (Thompson, 2008). This could create misunderstandings if the partner actively refuses to communicate.

Partner-uncertainty can affect both stepmothers and stepfathers in the same manner. In either situation, partner-uncertainty could center around the stepparent's perception of the willingness of the biological parent to help them successfully integrate into the family (Baxter et al., 2004; Ganong et al., 1999; Speer & Trees, 2007). As stated earlier, the stepparent enters the relationship as an *outsider* (Baxter et al., 2004; Schrodt, 2011), and as such is bound to the biological parent for guidance and support (Egeren & Hawkins, 2004; Ganong et al., 1999; Miller et al., 2017) in order to successfully navigate the situation.

In accordance with RTM, partner-uncertainty, similar to self-uncertainty, is experienced when the stepparent is unsure of how their spouse perceives them as effectively enacting their role as a stepparent and/or spouse (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Research supports the conception that an increase in partner-uncertainty can lead to a decrease in intimacy levels within the relationship and have a negative impact on communication behaviors (Solomon and Knobloch, 2001). Experiences of either self- or partner-uncertainty have been shown to prevent effective communication (Campbell et al., 2008; Egeren & Hawkins, 2004; Ganong et al., 1999; Miller et al., 2017, Thompson, 2008) and contribute to a reduction of intimacy (Solomon and Knobloch, 2001) and an increase in negative appraisals (Scheinfeld & Worley, 2018)

surrounding the behaviors of the spouse and ultimately expand and increase feelings of uncertainty for stepparents regarding other areas of the relationship.

   Relationship-uncertainty. Relationship uncertainty pertains to an individual's doubts and "questions associated with the relationship itself" (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004, p. 797). As such, it does not necessarily depend on the behaviors of any one partner in the relationship, but rather focuses on how the individual feels about the strength and longevity of the relationship itself (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b). Additionally, research has shown that relationship-uncertainty seems to be the most persistent of the three forms of uncertainty (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001) potentially making it the most difficult to navigate.

   Relationship-uncertainty can be created through a variety of different influences. Research has shown that relationship quality and satisfaction is related to the qualities such as the stepparent-child relationship (Baxter et al., 2004; Jensen & Ganong, 2019; Jensen et al., 2018; Patrick et al., 2007; Weaver & Coleman, 2005), how long the couple has been together (Campbell et al., 2008; Patrick et al., 2007), how the couple manages conflict (Campbell et al., 2008; Feinburg et al., 2007), and the resources each member brings to the relationship (Miller et al., 2017; Patrick et al., 2007).

   Since relationship uncertainty exists on a higher level than either self- or partner-uncertainty (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004) it does not need the other two to exist. Relationship partners can experience both self- and partner-uncertainty without necessarily experiencing relationship uncertainty, but all three have been found to intermingle and overlap during times of turbulence.

   Like both self- and partner-uncertainty, communication is the driving force in experiencing relationship uncertainty, but in times where communication is sufficient enough to

31

prevent self- or partner-uncertainty, stepparents could still feel uncertain about the relationship in terms of stability and longevity (Campbell et al., 2008). Any communication from the biological parent that suggests instability could be a generating force for relationship-uncertainty on the part of the stepparent. Issues such as the biological parent only being interested in the relationship for a finite amount of time (Baxter et al., 2004; Campbell et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2017) – perhaps until the child reaches a particular age – or only if particular resources remain available (Miller et al., 2017; Patrick et al., 2007) in the relationship, or only if new expectations are met (Baxter et al., 2004; Campbell et al., 2008) can all create feelings of uncertainty regarding the relationship for stepparents. Additionally, fluctuating levels of perceived commitment and intimacy have also been found to have a compounding effect on communication patterns and feelings of relationship-uncertainty for stepparents (Solomon and Knobloch,2001; Theiss & Solomon, 2006).

The fact remains that regardless of the source of uncertainty, relationship satisfaction hinges on how conflict is managed (Campbell et al., 2008; Fincham, 2003; Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b) and the overall communication patterns (Egeren & Hawkins, 2004; Jensen & Ganong, 2019; Ledermann et al., 2010; Miller et al., 2017; Schmeeckle, 2007; Thompson, 2008) within the stepparent-biological parent relationship. In addition to relational uncertainty, partner interference is likely to arise between stepparents and biological parents.

Partner interference. Partner interference for stepparents can be any action manifested by the spouse that impedes the ability of the stepparent to enact any behavior they consider to be beneficial to the relationship (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). The complicated nature of partner interference is that it is based entirely on the perception of the stepparent, meaning the action they consider to be partner interference can be either real or imagined and either intentional or

unintentional in respect to the spouse. Research has shown that stepparents are most likely to identify behaviors such as the spouse controlling household information (Marsiglio, 2004) whether pertaining to the children or other household issues, the spouse undermining their authority as a parent (Brown, 2017; Clarke-Stewart and Brentano, 2006), and behaviors that actively prevent the stepparent from effectively navigating their parental role to the stepchild(ren) (Goldscheider & Kaufman, 2006; Miller, 2010; Schrodt, 2011) as partner interference.

As the stepparent-biological parent relationship progresses, it is necessary for both parties to successfully integrate and navigate the other into established daily routines, however, the negotiation of interdependency is particularly troublesome for some individuals and have been found to elicit counterproductive emotional responses such as anger, sadness, fear, and jealousy (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010; Theiss & Solomon, 2006). The lack of coordinated behavior (Solomon and Knobloch, 2001) between spouses, poor communication patterns (Egeren & Hawkins, 2004; Marsiglio, 2004; Schmeeckle, 2007), low levels of intimacy (Solomon and Knobloch, 2001), and moderate to high levels of relational uncertainty have all been found to contribute to negative appraisals (Scheinfeld & Worley, 2018) of the spouse's behavior and perceptions of partner interference. As a result, the latitude of spousal behaviors that could potentially be considered partner interference and the lenient conditions under which an act can be identified as interference mean that partner interference can be particularly tricky and problematic for the stepparent-biological parent relationship.

Moving forward, now that a firm understanding of some of the basic elements and influences of the stepfamily landscape has been covered, information that has been presented relating to elements that can create feeling of uncertainty and perceptions of partner interference

for the stepparent, there is only one more element in need of discussion. This section provides

the framework that encapsulates the concepts already discussed in relation to the stepfamily

landscape but also the reasoning behind the use of RTM for the exploration of the stepparent

experience.

Chapter 3. Research Rationale

The basic tenets of RTM provide a solid base for studying individuals in close relationships (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a). Marriages can provide plenty of opportunities for partners to experience uncertainty, although the source of the uncertainty may be different. Potential sources of uncertainty in marriages may be external threats to the relationship, finances, or health concerns (Mikicki-Enyat et al., 2017). However, in addition to the sources of potential uncertainty that exist in both emerging relationships and traditional marriages, marriages where one of the individuals becomes a stepparent have additional opportunities for the creation of uncertainty.

For marriages that transform one partner into a stepparent, some of the potential sources of uncertainty may be more complex (Baxter et al., 2004; Campbell et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2017; Sanner & Coleman, 2017; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). With no steadfast rule for how to be a stepparent, or universal expectations concerning the role of the stepparent either in relation to the stepchild or as a spouse, issues such as a partner's expectations regarding the stepparent's role and responsibilities over the stepchildren (Bulcroft et al., 1998; Campbell et al., 2008; Feinburg et al., 2007; Jensen & Ganong, 2019; Marsiglio, 2004; Schrodt et al., 2006), the relationship with the stepchild (Ganong et al., 1999; Ganong et al., 2011; Ganong et al., 2018; Jensen & Shafer, 2013; Schmeeckle, 2007), and the influence of the other biological parent (Ganong et al., 1999; Ganong et al., 2011; Jensen & Shafer, 2013; Marsiglio, 2004; Schmeeckle, 2007) on the household can all be potential sources for uncertainty.

The RTM is most commonly studied quantitatively, with a focus on using relational uncertainty and partner interference to predict relational outcomes; however, Mikicki-Enyart et al. (2017) qualitatively studied sources of relational uncertainty and interference from partners as

experienced by adult children following late-life parental divorce. Building on Mikicki-Enyart et al.'s (2017) foundational research on the application of RTM to the examination of long-standing unions, the purpose of this research is to uncover some of the ways in which stepparents experience uncertainty and interference.

Understanding that stepparents can experience self-uncertainty as the result of turbulence created regarding self-prescribed parental roles (Goldscheider & Kaufman, 2006; Miller, 2010; Schrodt, 2011), societal expectations (Ganong et al., 1999; Jones, 2003; Miller, 2010; Miller et al., 2017; Schmeeckle, 2007; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011; Weaver & Coleman, 2005), and partner-communicated expectations (Baxter et al., 2004; Bulcroft et al., 1998; Feinburg et al., 2007; Jensen & Ganong, 2019; Schrodt et al., 2006),), RQ1 seeks to uncover some specific themes related to how stepparents experience self-uncertainty in their marriage:

RQ1: How do stepparents experience self-uncertainty as a component of their marriage and role as a stepparent?

The second element of RTM is partner-uncertainty. Within the concept of stepparent marriages, partner-uncertainty can be created in connection with self-uncertainty or as an element that stands alone. For stepparents, common causes of partner-uncertainty are differences in communication patterns (Campbell et al., 2008; Egeren & Hawkins, 2004; Ganong et al., 1999; Marsiglio, 2004; Miller et al., 2017; Schmeeckle, 2007; Thompson, 2008) or lack of spousal support (Egeren & Hawkins, 2004; Ganong et al., 1999; Miller et al., 2017) which ultimately leave the stepparent questioning the level of commitment their spouse has to the relationship. RQ2 seeks to uncover some specific themes related to how stepparents experience uncertainty regarding their marriage partner:

RQ2: How do stepparents experience partner-uncertainty as a component of their

marriage?

The third element of RTM is relationship uncertainty, which relates to how one

individual feels about the potential longevity of the relationship as a whole, above and beyond

both self- and partner-uncertainty. For stepparents, relationship-uncertainty can be caused by

issues such as conflict management (Campbell et al., 2008; Feinburg et al., 2007) , duration of

the relationship (Campbell et al., 2008; Patrick et al., 2007), and the quality of the stepparent-

child relationship (Baxter et al., 2004; Jensen & Ganong, 2019; Jensen et al., 2018; Patrick et al.,

2007; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). RQ3 seeks to uncover some specific themes related to how

stepparents experience uncertainty regarding the quality and potential longevity their marriage:

RQ3: How do stepparents experience relationship-uncertainty as a component of

their marriage?

Part of the RTM but separated from measurements of uncertainty is partner interference

which relates to actions performed by one individual that is perceived by the other individual and

preventing to otherwise hindering the enactment of a specific behavior deemed appropriate by

the relational partner. For stepparents, this could be typical as, similar to emerging relationships,

established relationships are not immune to interference from partners (Mikicki-Enyart et al.,

2017). For stepparents, partner interference can come in the form of informational roadblocks

(Marsiglio, 2004) for the stepparent enacted by their spouse, behaviors that negatively impact

coparenting efforts (Feinburg et al., 2007; Schrodt, 2011), or any other behavior than influences

or controls elements of the marriage. RQ4 seeks to uncover some specific themes related to how

stepparents perceive and experience partner interference with their spouse:

RQ4: How do stepparents experience partner interference within their marriage?

Chapter 4. Methodology

This research utilizes a qualitative method approach due to its ability to "yield extraordinarily rich data" (Ganong & Coleman, 2014, p. 451) and "provide individuals on the fringes of society a venue to express their unique stories" (Ganong & Coleman, 2014, p. 455). Additionally, qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for understanding the experiences of stepparents because they can be used to examine the interactions within a family as a process (Weaver and Coleman, 2005). This research extends the use of RTM as a lens through which to examine interpersonal relationships, moving beyond the model's foundational application by Knobloch & Solomon (2002a; 2002b) and closely follows the model's application to long-standing relationships by Mikucki-Enyart et al. (2017).

Following the lead of Mikucki-Enyart et al. (2017), the author used RTM as a sensitizing tool (Bowen, 2006; Van Den Hoonaard, 2008) which provided the ability to be sensitized to "possible lines of inquiry" (Van Den Hoonaard, 2008, p. 814) during the interview process and also provided a means of identifying "suggest[ed] directions along which to look" (as cited in Bowen, 2006, p.14) for emerging themes. Through the use of RTM and sensitizing concepts, interviews were conducted with the purpose of uncovering specific themes related to how stepparents experience relational uncertainty and partner interference.

Participants

Participants were recruited using flyers posted on the university campus and information posted on social media. Social media information was disseminated using the principal investigator's (PI) personal profile and social media groups dedicated to stepparents and stepfamilies. To qualify, each participant was required to be at least 18 years of age, be married, and have at least one stepchild. Marriage was defined as the legal union of two individuals

involving a marriage license and state sanctioned ceremony (Getting Married: An Overview, para. 2) and was chosen on the grounds that many individuals perceive marriage as a "covenant bond" (Yarhouse & Nowacki, 2007, p. 38) that is "lifelong and exclusive" (Meaning and Purpose, para.3) where individuals "commit to the obligations and responsibilities of being husband and wife" (Kefalas, Furstenberg, Carr, & Napolitano, 2011, p. 868). Criteria such as race, ethnicity, maximum number of stepchildren, stepparent status (stepfather or stepmother), custody status, previous marriages or stepparent experience, and/or other criteria were not used as either inclusion or exclusion criteria for participants. Additionally, the relationship between the non-stepparent and the child, biological or adoptive, was not used as either inclusion or exclusion criteria, however, it is worth noting that the spouse of each participant was a biological parent to their child. Although a significant amount of interest in the research was gained, care was taken to ensure each participant met the inclusion criteria. After inclusion criteria was verified, interview locations and times were determined which ensured the participant had adequate security of confidentiality.

Participant interviews were conducted using two different means. Half of the participants chose to be interviewed in a public setting while the other half decided to be interviewed over the telephone. The decision to be interviewed over the telephone was likely the result of a number of factors such as convenience, personal preference, and/or perhaps a perceived power differential - the PI conducting the interview is male and the majority of participants are female – although a definitive exploration of the possible factors was not made. For those who decided to be interviewed in a public setting, the interviews were conducted inside a semi-private space within the setting which was agreed upon by both the participant and PI as sufficiently able to provide

adequate privacy and protection so the confidential nature of data and participation would not be compromised.

The sample included 6 participants (5 female and 1 male) fitting various stepfamily situations (Table 1). The mean age of participants was 38 years of age and three participants had only one stepchild. The mean length of marriage was 4.5 years. The mean age of a stepchild was 10 years old and the group was evenly split between stepparent marriages that have under 50 percent custody of the stepchild(ren), those that have 50 percent custody of the stepchild(ren), and those that have more than 50 percent custody of the stepchild(ren).

Data Collection

All interviews were conducted by the PI and recorded for later transcription and analysis. The mean length of the interviews was 43 minutes and participants received no compensation for their participation. Similar to Marsiglio (2004), each interview started with the participant describing the nature of their stepfamily situation. Participants explained how long they had been married to their partner, the number of children in the household, their relationship to each child, and the established custody agreement concerning the stepchild(ren). Following the foundational

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant Name	Age	Spouse's Age	Length of Marriage	Number of Children	Name and Age of Child	Relationship to Child	Stepchild Custody
Ellen	39	39	10 years	3	Jason (11)	Step	>50%
					Samantha (18)	Bio (prev.)	
					Tabatha (15)	Bio (prev.)	
Erika	49	56	2 years	1	Jessica (8)	Step	<50%
Carmen	47	49	5 years	5	Christina (3)	Bio (tgt.)	50%
					Matthew (17)	Step	
					Joseph (13)	Step	
					April (19)	Bio (prev.)	

					Victoria (17)	Bio (prev.)	
Lindsey	35	35	1 year	4	Brian (9)	Step	50%
					Zachary (6)	Step	
					Kadence (4)	Step	
					Christopher (9)	Bio (prev.)	
Irene	31	45	7 years	2	Tommy (21)	Step	>50%
					Sarah (13)	Step	
Marty	29	29	4 years	1	Natalie (3)	Bio (tgt.)	<50%
					Bradley (6)	Step	

description of the stepfamily provided by the participant, interview questions became more focused (Appendix).

Participants were asked to describe the parenting approach they enacted with their spouse regarding the child(ren) in the household, with special emphasis on similarities and differences between their self and their partner. Inquiring about differences in parenting styles follows Clarke-Stewart and Brentano's (2006) conclusion that the most common source of conflict in stepparent marriages is disagreements concerning how to appropriately parent the child(ren). Participants were then asked about the influence of the nonresidential biological parent in parenting the stepchild(ren) and on the stepparent-biological parent relationship which was considered beneficial to the understanding of self-uncertainty experienced by the stepparent because the relationship between the stepchild and the nonresidential biological parent has been found to be influential over the attitudes and behaviors of the stepchild (Schrodt, 2011).

The remaining questions related directly to the research questions. To gain insights regarding RQ1, participants were asked about experiences of uncertainty surrounding their role as a parent to their stepchild(ren). To gain insights regarding RQ2, participants were asked about experiences of uncertainty concerning their ability to coparent effectively with their spouse. To gain insights regarding RQ3, participants were asked about experiences with uncertainty

regarding the future of their marriage. RQ4, which relates to partner interference, was not

directly addressed during the interview process, but the nature of partner interference was

considered such that it would surface naturally during the interview conversation.

After each interview, impressions and reflections were written by the PI. The reflections

were used for the purpose of improving the approach of the interviewer and of the interview

process itself. Using the reflections, slight adjustments were made to the interview questions that

seemed necessary to more effectively engage the participants and uncover relative information.

The reflections and impressions were not included in the data set for analysis but did influence

portions of the discussion, limitations, and future directions.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, de-identified, and assigned pseudonyms to ensure

the confidentiality of the participants. Using RTM as a sensitizing tool (Bowen, 2006; Mikucki-

Enyart et al., 2017; Van Den Hoonaard, 2008), the structure and process of thematic analysis

make it an opportune fit for this research. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) "one of the

benefits of thematic analysis is its flexibility." (p. 4) And the nature of thematic analysis means

that it "can be a method which works both to reflect reality, and to unpick or unravel the surface

of 'reality" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 9). Operating from a 'theoretical', constructionist

perspective, the interview data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases.

Phase 1 of a thematic analysis is about the analyst, in this case the PI, familiarizing

himself with the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). Each interview was transcribed verbatim, printed,

read, and reread in a different order by the PI. The purpose of this was to allow the PI to

refamiliarize himself with the data and become fully immersed in what the participants were

saying in their interviews (Miller, 2010). Phase 2 of the analysis is when initial codes are

generated (Braun & Clark, 2006). The transcribed interviews were analyzed individually using the RQs as code references. Similar to Weaver and Coleman's (2005) approach, and following and inductive process (Baxter et al., 2004; Saint-Jacques et al., 2011), passages were highlighted using a separate color for each corresponding code; self-uncertainty, partner-uncertainty, relationship-uncertainty, and partner interference. After all interview transcriptions were analyzed and all important passages were identified and highlighted according to their initial code, all passages from all interview transcriptions were inserted individually into code-corresponding Microsoft Excel spreadsheets for further analysis.

Phase 3 of the analysis is about searching for themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). Each code-specific spreadsheet was analyzed individually. Unlike grounded theory which could conduct word-by-word or line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2014; Weaver & Coleman, 2005), the decision was made to code each excerpt individually rather than each line to ensure the participants' voices would remain in the research and not potentially be lost or distorted from over-analysis. The excerpts were located on the right side of the page and then, following an inductive process (Baxter et al., 2004), were assigned words or phrases that represented the overall concept of the excerpt (Ganong et al., 2018) (i.e. behavior of child, differences in parenting, disadvantage, etc.) which were located in a column to the left of the excerpts.

Phase 4 of the analysis is about reviewing the themes identified in *Phase 3* (Braun & Clark, 2006). Revisiting each code-specific spreadsheet individually, the *theme* column was organized for increased effectiveness and an additional column was added to the far left side of the sheet adjacent to the previous *theme* column. The previous themes were then reanalyzed in relation to the excerpt and the initial analytical code for adherence to the research goal. The themes were then grouped and re-themed into more encompassing concepts. Phase 4 was enacted

twice to ensure the selected groups were sufficiently encompassing and representative of the data set and message.

Phase 5 of the analysis is about specifically defining and naming the emergent themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). Similar to *Phase 3* and *Phase 4*, *Phase 5* is based on the concept of axial coding (Charmaz, 2014). After themes were identified in *Phase 3* and then grouped and relabeled in *Phase 4*, more concrete definition and title was applied to each theme as it related to the specific initial code of self-uncertainty, partner-uncertainty, relationship-uncertainty or partner interference (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a; Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). However, as the intention of this research is to give voice to the participants and shed light on the complexities of managing life and uncertainty for stepparents, care was taken to not over-generalize the data into large themes that could potentially do a disservice to the data or the participants.

Phase 6 of the analysis is about producing the final report (Braun & Clark, 2006). To satisfy Phase 6, each initial code was identified through its emergent themes and each theme was illustrated using its interview passage(s) and re-coupled with its corresponding participant. The complete report for *Phase 6* of the analysis is presented in the next section, Results.

Chapter 5. Results

The Relational Turbulence Model positions relational uncertainty (i.e., self, partner, and relationship uncertainty) and partner interference as precursors to the experience of relational turbulence, a prolonged sense of turmoil and tension that can have negative effects on a relationship (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). A thematic analysis of participants' responses indicated that participants in this study experienced all four components of the RTM as they navigated their role as a stepparent. Consistent with previous qualitative investigations of the RTM (Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2016), these results are organized according to the RTM, and not by research question.

Do I Have What It Takes To Be A Stepparent?

Solomon and Knobloch (2004) define self-uncertainty as the questions and doubts an individual has about their own involvement or role in the relationship. For participants, the experience of self-uncertainty typically arose when they did not fully understand their role as either a stepparent or as a spouse, meaning they had encountered issues that manifested ambiguity about their responsibilities both to their stepchild(ren) and/or their marriage partner. The source of self-uncertainty most identified by participants in this research centered around confusion about how their partner wanted them to enact parenting.

"I don't have any power". One way participants experienced uncertainty around enacting parenting roles was in relation to dealing with deviant behaviors from the stepchild. In these instances, the participants were confused about whether or not they should take a more active role in correcting potentially problematic behaviors in the child. For example, Erika, a 49-year old stepmother of one, described the influence of her stepdaughter, Jessica's, grandparents on Jessica's behavior. Erika expressed uncertainty because her spouse did not seem worried about Jessica's behavior in the same way as Erika was. In talking about her husband and what Erika considered to be the root of Jessica's behavior, Erika said, "His [parents] have helped a lot but they have spoiled Jessica because she is the only grandchild because he is their only son." Erika continued by describing her husband's response to Jessica acting "spoiled" as, "he is so laid back…so, I'm in a situation where I am with a child, but don't have any power." Erica's response of feeling powerless is a representation of her uncertainty about how she should enact parenting when it does not seem in accordance with her husband's parenting behavior.

Ellen, a 39-year-old mother of two and stepmother of one, also described her uncertainty surrounding what she thought was expected from her as a stepparent by her spouse; however, her uncertainty stemmed from behaviors from her stepson that were related to a diagnosed behavioral disorder. Ellen described her stepson, Jason, as "high-functioning autistic" and illustrated his difficulty with daily routines by suggesting that, "Jason doesn't know that [getting up, getting dressed, changing clothes, brushing his teeth, and showering] are things that he needs to do, so you have to tell him." Ellen then illustrated the incongruity between her actions and those of her husband's, saying "my husband just doesn't [remind Jason to do things], it's usually me" and then added, "and my husband feels like I'm getting onto his son for [not] doing those things." For Ellen, this incongruity created feelings of uncertainty about how her husband

wanted her to enact her role as a parent to her stepson, because she felt that her husband wanted her to take the responsibility of parenting her stepson but then was punished for doing so.

Similarly, Lindsey, a 35-year-old mother of one and stepmother of three, also illustrated uncertainty about how she was expected to enact her parenting role in conjunction with a diagnosed behavioral disorder. Lindsey described her situation with her oldest stepson, Brian's, behavioral issues by explaining that, "Brian has ADHD and a lot of aggression issues…and that is difficult [to deal with] because he is quite aggressive with my son…and to his other brother and sister." Lindsey elaborated on how this generated uncertainty regarding her role as a parent by suggesting that her husband enables the stepson by providing different standards for Brian than what he expects for the rest of the children. She stated, "I am already a parent and I have a son who is the same age as my husband's son so I can't parent Brian [one way] and not parent the other children [the same way] because that would be weird." Lindsey's declaration shows that she feels a need to parent all the kids in the same manner and that she feels uncertain about how to parent when her husband feels the rules should be different for one child than the others. Beyond the concept of the enactment of parenting, stepparents also experienced self-uncertainty surrounding the expectations held for the children within the household.

"They are just going to be kids to her". Challenges concerning competing expectations not in direct relation to deviant behavior caused uncertainty for several participants. In these situations, it was not specifically a behavior enacted by the stepchild that created uncertainty but rather an overall incongruity between the parenting behaviors participants were being pressured to enact and the parenting behaviors enacted by their marriage partner. Carmen, a 47-year-old mother of three (2 from a previous marriage and one from the current marriage) and stepmother to two, described the differences in expectations between her and her husband in relation to her stepsons. Carmen described her husband's parenting style by saying, "from what I saw, there was no structure…[Matthew and Joseph] could do whatever they wanted" whereas she described her own thoughts as, "if I'm cooking dinner…and I announce that it's time to eat, [then] the expectation is that all the kids come down and [help set the table]." She later admitted that not only have their parenting differences caused her to experience uncertainty about what her husband expected from her as a parent in the past but that it continues to be a constant source of uncertainty for her. She illustrated the ongoing process of how she continues to deal with her uncertainty by saying she just has to remain patient and enlist the help of "a lot of prayer, and some wine in between" and that "has gotten [my husband and I] to a point where we're still not 100% but it's a lot better than it was before." Ellen's statement is reflective of statements made by multiple participants, where they simultaneously recognize that their situation has both improved from what it once was and that it still needs work in order to reduce uncertainty.

Marty, a 29-year-old father of one from his current marriage and stepfather of one, described how in many ways, he and his wife are on the same page about things. However, eventually he spoke about the differences between his enactment of parenting and his wife's enactment of parenting by explaining how "she's more of a 'time out' person, and I'm more of a

'take something away' person." This created confusion for Marty surrounding his wife's expectations of him regarding his enactment of parenting. He later added that the issue of enacting parenting may continue to be an active source of uncertainty for him in the future by illustrating his wife's views on children: "They are just going to be kids to her." To Marty, his wife's statement and subsequent views on children suggested that it may be a considerable amount of time before she considers their children as needing to become more responsible for their actions which seemed unsettling for him.

In all previous examples, the stepparent experienced self-uncertainty as a result of being confused about how they were expected to enact their step-parenting responsibilities. While some of the participant's confusion circled around parenting over specific issues concerning their stepchild's behavior, other participants experienced uncertainty as a result of mismatched expectations about parenting in general. Either way, the confusion felt by the participants caused them to question themselves and ultimately created experiences for them of self-uncertainty.

Why Can't They Just Be Clear?

Solomon and Knobloch (2004) define partner-uncertainty as the doubts and questions an individual has about their relationship partner's role and commitment to the relationship. In this study, partner-uncertainty was generated when their marriage partner, the residential biological parent, enacted a behavior that creates a situation for the stepparent where they question their partner's commitment to the relationship. For these participants, a lack of consistent behavior from their spouse emerged as the participant's leading cause of partner-uncertainty.

Many participants acknowledged experiences of partner-uncertainty relating to a lack of consistency from their partner over time. However, whereas some participants noticed a rather

49

slow shift in their partner's behavior, taking a year or more, others experienced more rapid shifts, sometimes occurring over the course of a couple months, weeks, or almost daily.

Ellen, who has been married to her husband for 10 years, presented her situation as one almost constantly in a state of flux and inconsistency. She explained that the custody agreement determined that she and her husband only have her stepson, Jason, every other weekend and on holidays but described her husband's attitude toward Jason's presence in the home. She explained, "My husband feels more like Jason is a guest in our house…so, he doesn't have responsibilities. Jason doesn't have to take care of anything, pick up after himself, that sort of thing." She then described her thoughts on the matter as, "to me…this is still Jason's home. He still needs responsibility." The issue, however, is more than simply the inconsistency in expectations for Jason between Ellen and her husband. The core of the issue, the one that creates partner-uncertainty for Ellen, is the inconsistency in attitude from her husband. She illustrated the crux of the situation by saying:

> It's difficult because sometimes my husband is like "I want us to be a family…I want you
> to treat Jason like he's your son." But then other days, if I go in there and tell Jason to
> pick up his room, or go take a shower, or go brush [his] teeth then my husband gets mad
> at me for telling him what to do.

The lack of consistency in attitude from her husband became an almost daily reminder for Ellen that she felt uncertain about his expectations for their relationship, and it is that lack of understanding that generates her feelings of uncertainty.

Carmen, who had been married for 5 years, expressed her confusion surrounding her partner's lack of consistency by first acknowledging that, "I think he truly appreciated what I was doing [as a parent] because I don't think he knew how to. I don't think he knew [how to]

balance nurturing and guiding while disciplining [the children] if necessary and applauding when necessary." However, a short while later, Carmen's confusion was made apparent when she went on to more explicitly describe her feelings toward his parenting and the uncertainty it caused her. She made it apparent that she was frustrated, confused, and ultimately uncertain about whether she was enacting parenting in accordance with his views when she said:

> We went at it often because I feel like being the disciplinarian, of course, the kids are always going to hate me. [He] gets to be [the] "Disney Dad" and "Disney Stepdad" because [he gets to] come in with all the fun stuff, but I'm the one holding them accountable for chores and homework and all those things.

As a result of her husband's actions, Carmen does not understand how he feels about her enactment of parenting. She was confused about whether or not he believes she is doing what needs to be done, and ultimately that confusion is creating feelings of partner-uncertainty for Carmen.

In both previous illustrations, participants illustrated how they experienced partner-uncertainty as the result of their partner's inconsistency. They all expressed that in one moment they believed they knew how their partner perceived them as a parent and spouse, but in another moment, they did not. It is important to note that it was not the behavior specifically that caused the uncertainty, but the confusion surrounding the change of behavior that made the participants uncertain about their partner's commitment to the relationship.

What Does This Mean For Our Future?

According to Knobloch and Solomon (1999), relationship-uncertainty embodies ambiguity about the relationship dyad itself; in other words, it is not about how an individual feels about either their partner or themselves within the relationship. Instead, relationship-

uncertainty encapsulates how the individual feels about the health and longevity of the relationship as a whole. For participants, the experience of relationship-uncertainty transcended their view of their own actions and/or the actions of their partner and instead represented a more global assessment of the influence of their enactment of parenting on the marriage and the potential threat to the longevity of the stepparent-biological parent relationship.

"I'm closer to Tommy's age than his dad's". Both Erika and Irene noted how being a stepparent created doubts and uncertainty about their marriage. Irene, a 31-year-old stepmother of two who has been married for 7 years, illustrated the influence of not only enacting parenting behaviors but also the influence of her age on the potential longevity of her marriage. She explained how the first year of her marriage was difficult because she, "went from living at home with [her] parents to having an instant family overnight pretty much." Irene then illustrated the uncertainty she experienced as a result of simultaneously having to deal with her stepson Tommy's behavior and also having to deal with the age gap between herself and her husband. She explained her concerns:

> When Tommy was younger, he had a lot of issues with his parents divorcing and stuff. We had a lot of behavioral issues with that and [his poor behavior] made me question a whole lot [about my relationship]…because I am 14 years younger than my husband. So, when I got married I was 23 and Tommy was 12 almost 13 and so I was actually closer to Tommy's age than his dad's age. It made me think, "Do I need to be doing this?" ["Should I continue in this relationship?"]

In this one excerpt from her interview, it is apparent that Irene considered her age and her inexperience as a parent to both be potential influences on the longevity of her marriage and, as a result, Irene experienced feelings of relationship-uncertainty.

"The teenage years are not going to go well". Erika experienced relationship-uncertainty surrounding her marriage slightly differently than Irene. In Erika's case, the source of her uncertainty was the discrepancy between her enactment of parenting and her husband's enactment of parenting over her stepdaughter Jessica. Twice in her interview, she expressed reluctance about her marriage progressing as a result of her and her spouse not being "on the same page." In one instance, she explained how a previous marriage, where she was also a stepmother, ended poorly and noted the similarities between her previous marriage and her current marriage. Erika described her concerns with the current marriage as, "[my husband and I used to be] on the same page [but we are not now], so it makes me nervous about going forward and it makes me want to pull back because I'm in a bad position." Later in the interview, Erika returned to the topic and illustrated her concerns it bit more specifically when she stated:

> [Not being on the same page about parenting] makes [my decision to continue with the relationship] difficult because I think, at this point, going forward without us being on the same page…*[silent pause]*…[the future] is not…*[silent pause]*…the teenage years are not going to go well if that makes sense.

In both of Erika's statements, she illustrates her uncertainty about her marriage and whether or not it will last. Erika was the only stepparent who experienced relationship-uncertainty in direct connection to previous stepparent experiences.

"I just knew that was the end of my marriage". Ellen experienced relationship-uncertainty because she perceived that husband was more loyal to her stepson, Jason, than he was to her. The difference between the experiences of Ellen and that of the other participants is that her uncertainty can be directly linked to identifiable, specific communication patterns. In her interview, Ellen described an altercation between her biological daughter, Samantha, and her stepson, Jason, where Samantha became physical. In addition to the description of the event, Ellen also expressed her thoughts on how her husband's loyalty to Jason could have ended the marriage instantly. She commented that:

> Samantha slapped Jason on the face because he was yelling at her. [The altercation unfolded when] Jason jumped up and acted like he was going to hit Samantha, so Samantha smacked him, and I just knew that was the end of [my] marriage.

As her interview continued, Ellen outlined more situations where her husband's loyalty to Jason caused other verbal disputes within the marriage and eventually offered one more statement that seemed to an adequate job of summing up her overall feelings of relationship-uncertainty. After returning to the issue of her marriage one more time, Ellen said:

> I don't know that we will last forever. I mean there could be something that could happen [at any moment] and he decide "I've had enough." And there are days that I've said, "Well I just can't do this anymore. I can't deal with your son. I can't deal with the things that you do. And I'm going to leave."

Ellen's statements suggested that she understands, and in some form accepts, that the security and potential longevity of the marriage is questionable and therefore is experiencing relationship-uncertainty. Through her comments, Ellen sent a clear message that she believes that the

couple's enactment of parenting within the marriage could potentially cause the dissolution of their relationship.

From these excerpts, it is apparent that a variety of issues can become sources of relationship-uncertainty for stepparents. However, in addition to experiences of self-, partner-, and relationship-uncertainty, the RTM also includes perceptions of partner interference. Several stepparents gave examples of what they perceived to be partner interference.

Why Do They Do That?

Solomon and Knobloch (2004) define partner interference as an individual's perception that his or her partner prevents the achievement of goals. A fundamental aspect of partner interference is that the interference does not necessarily have to exist but rather that it must at least be perceived to exist by the individual in the relationship. Participants in this study were able to identify instances when their partners' behaviors were perceived as incompatible with their roles as stepparents *or* their roles as a partner within the stepparent-biological parent relationship.

"Because your dad told you it was okay". During her interview, Carmen illustrated a situation where her husband interfered with her ability to parent her two stepsons Matthew and Joseph. After describing how her husband repeatedly undermined and blocked her parenting efforts with her stepsons, she confessed:

> I tell [Matthew and Joseph] all the time [that] "It's hard to be a stepparent" because there is a line…I'm not going to put you on punishment because your dad told you it was okay for you not to do that and I'm saying that you [have to do it].

Carmen believes that her husband intentionally prevents her from having a voice as a parent to her stepsons by not supporting her authority to set rules and boundaries. However, beyond the

area of an interference to a stepparent's ability to parent effectively, some participants described ways in which their spouse interfered with the personal connection within the marriage itself.

"We need our own time". Marty identified an example of partner interference when he spoke about how his wife prevented him from utilizing their time together in the evening after the children go to bed for activities he believes can create a more intimate connection in their relationship. After explaining how their lack of options for child supervision makes "the time frames where you can have your alone time, the take-you-out time and stuff like that very minimal", he described how his wife misuses their little bit of unaccompanied time, saying, "she would always stay up way later than me and just play on her phone, that… really bothered me." In Marty's mind, the little bit of time they can salvage away from the children should be spent building intimacy, so Marty perceived her excessive use of her digital device as a way of interfering with his desire to spend intimate time with her, thus preventing the two of them from building a closer bond in the marriage.

Similar to Marty, Ellen also saw behavior from her spouse as an interference to the building and improvement of the relationship. During Ellen's interview, she recounted how, during the early stages of her marriage, her husband interfered with her ability to build their budding relationship by not providing them the opportunity to spend time together without the children. She explained how the originally custody agreement over Jason was such that they never had much time alone without any of the children and saw him as unwilling to do make any adjustments to rectify that situation. She expressed to him, "Look, we are newly married. We need some sort of time to ourselves. It's not fair to us to never have time to work on us and our relationship, you know, it's a new relationship, we need our own time." By making these claims to her husband, she was signaling her wish to have more intimate time together, but his lack of

action on the matter created a situation where she perceived his actions, or lack thereof, as interfering with the couple's ability to build a more close connection with each other.

These excerpts demonstrate that participants perceive interference from the biological parent, both in terms of their ability to stepparent and in terms of the couple's ability to build a strong relationship together. According to the RTM, the combination of self-, partner-, and relationship-uncertainty is coupled with partner interference to create a sense of relational turbulence (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002a; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004).

Experiencing Turbulence: "He Has Already Left Twice"

According to Solomon and Knobloch (2004) relational turbulence is a state of turmoil existent as a result of the pairing of relational-uncertainty which is the combined experiences of self-, partner-, and relationship-uncertainty, and partner interference. The state of turmoil that is relational turbulence is well-cultivated ground for the growth of relationship dissolution, meaning that stepparents who experience a significant enough amount of relational turbulence are more likely to dissolve the stepparent-biological parent marriage. In connection with this research, excerpts from participants' interviews demonstrate that these stepparent-biological parent relationships are experiencing relational turbulence. Ellen, a 39-year-old biological mother of Samantha (18 years of age) and Tabatha (15 years of age) and stepparent of Jason (11 years of age), provided the most illuminating example of all of the RTM components. She outlined her experience of relational uncertainty as her spouse's ambiguity regarding her parenting responsibilities over Jason (see pg. 42) which generated feelings of self-uncertainty, her husband's constantly shifting attitude of one moment wanting her to treat Jason like he is her own son and the next minute chastising her for correcting Jason's behavior (see pg. 45) which generated feelings of partner-uncertainty, and her perception that her husband held more loyalty

57

to his biological son than to her or their marriage (see pg. 49) which created feelings of relationship uncertainty. In partnership with her experiences with relational uncertainty, Ellen also experienced partner interference which she described as her husband behaving in ways that interfered with her ability to enhance the intimacy in their marriage (see pg. 51) Recognizing that Ellen is experiencing both relational uncertainty and partner interference, she also inadvertently discussed her experiences with relational turbulence. When discussing her marriage, Ellen illustrated the tense situation of her marriage with comments such as "I'm telling you, it's rough [dealing with our differences in parenting Jason]. We fight about that quite a lot actually" and "I don't know that we will last forever. He has [already] left twice during our marriage." thus displaying the significant amount of turmoil surrounding her marriage.

From the findings of this study, it is apparent that the stepparent-biological parent relationship is fraught with difficulties for stepparents. There exists a plethora of possibilities for stepparents to experience uncertainty within their marriage. They can experience all forms of self-, partner-, and relationship-uncertainty as well as face a multitude of possible ways in which their spouse can interfere with the relationship which make the application of RTM an effective tool for evaluating and understanding the stepparent experience.

Chapter 6. Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore and examine the experiences of stepparents in the context of their marriage with the goal of identifying sources and experiences of uncertainty. As predicted, the elements of self-, partner-, and relationship-uncertainty in addition to partner interference as outline by RTM were successful in guiding the examination and uncovering prominent and relevant themes of uncertainty ultimately producing a means by which the experiences of stepparents can be illuminated and illustrated.

As illustrated earlier, a good deal of knowledge has been gained surrounding the complexity and diversity of stepfamilies, however this research is different. Whereas previous stepfamily research has attempted to provide suggestions for stepfamilies regarding parenting (Egeren & Hawkins, 2004; Feinburg et al., 2007; Schrodt, 2011) and role adoption (Speer & Trees, 2007), and others have determined the possible effects of the stepfamily structure on the children in the household (Goldscheider & Kaufman, 2006), this research focused on illustrating the actual experience of being a stepparent.

Using RTM as a framework was beneficial for a variety of reasons, however, what may be considered the most beneficial for stepfamilies is RTM's ability to uncover sources of uncertainty within the relationship, which Mikucki-Enyart et al. (2017) also noted in their application of RTM to adults dealing with late-life parental divorce. A firm understanding of sources of uncertainty and partner interference can assist stepparents and their spouses to navigate difficulties within their relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002b; Solomon & Knobloch, 2001).

The most significant finding of this research is that stepparents experience a multitude of sources of uncertainty surrounding being a stepparent. The stepfamily is a complex web of

interrelated issues, relationships, expectations, roles, and uncertainties. As a result, a significant number of stepparents live within a state of almost constant confusion surrounding these elements of their marriage. Many stepparents experience doubt and uncertainty regarding their role as a stepparent. The decision to take an active role in the parenting of their stepchild(ren) is one that many stepparents make. However, when they receive messages from their spouse concerning the expectations of that role that are not congruent with the role they wish to enact, they experience confusion and uncertainty. In this thesis, stepparents identified messages of competing expectations as a source of uncertainty. Additionally, stepparents who have a stepchild(ren) with a diagnosed behavioral disorder find the issue of competing expectations of parenting even more complex because, as illustrated, many stepparents do not have the experience necessary to effectively care for a child with a behavioral disorder. This is compounded when the expectations of society to be a caring and loving mother do not coincide with the behavioral expectations of the biological parent, who often feels it is necessary to honor the biological parent bond (Ganong et al., 1999; Ganong et al., 2011) and protect their child in one way or another. All the stepparents in this research identified the communication of competing or opposing expectations for the stepchild(ren) and, more specifically, their self and their spouse not being on the same page as sources of self-uncertainty, suggesting that their experiences caused them to doubt their own abilities to enact parenting in a way that coincided with their personal beliefs on parenting.

These results are congruent with the existing body of knowledge concerning stepparent behaviors. Foundationally, Theiss and Soloman (2006) found that "insecurity about a partner's positive regard corresponds with a general lack of self-esteem." (p. 395) However, more specifically, Degarmo and Forgatch (2002) point out that stepmothers place more emphasis on

"affiliative roles," (p.279) meaning they care more about their role as a parent than as their role as a spouse (Shaprio, 2014; Suanet, van der Pas, & van Tilburg, 2013). Degarmo and Forgatch (2002) also state that stepfathers place more emphasis on their role as a spouse than that of a stepparent. However, regardless of the direction of emphasis, the fact remains that for stepparents, any communication that a particular role is unacceptable, or that it is not being effectively enacted, by the spouse has the ability to cause the stepparent to doubt themselves in the relationship.

Changes in attitudes and behaviors can also create experiences of uncertainty within the stepparent-biological parent relationship. Stepparents become confused when the messages from their spouse abruptly change. The change in attitude or behavior suggest what Knobloch and Theiss (2010) refer to as "a period of transition" (p. 597) for the relationship which is where an understood position of the relationship has undergone some form of adjustment. Stepparents who experience shifts in the attitudes and behaviors of their spouse become uncertain about the spouse's view of their position in the relationship. The confusion surrounding the attitudinal and behavioral shift causes the stepparent to question the expectations and commitment of the spouse to the relationship. Regardless of the rate at which the changes are enacted – some stepparents note rapid shift in attitudes, almost daily, while other stepparents note changes that took place slowly over the course of several years – there is no difference in the experience of uncertainty for stepparents. When the attitude and behaviors from the biological parent change from a position of support to a more adversarial position, it has a negative impact on the relationship and can leave stepparents questioning their desire to remain in the marriage.

These results are congruent with the existing body of knowledge in that Knobloch and Solomon (2005) found that individuals experiencing uncertainty have difficulties making

judgements concerning the level of intimacy within the relationship. Baxter et al. (2004) also found that stepparents who experience shifts in attitude and behavior from their spouse become unsure of the amount of trust and cooperation they share with their partner and if the relationship is progressing in a positive manner. Additionally, similar to experiences of self-uncertainty, research shows that it is imperative to the health and longevity of the marriage that the stepparent and spouse remain consistent and in agreement when it comes to household and relationship management (Brown, 2017; Saint-Jacques et al., 2011).

Slight nuances of the relationship can also become concerns for stepparents. Differences such as age and life desires can create feelings of uncertainty about the longevity of the marriage. Stepparents who are significantly younger or older than their spouse can feel uneasy about the impact the age difference may have on the relationship over time. Whereas, they may not be experiencing any significant amount of uncertainty presently in the relationship regarding the age difference, they may be concerned about potential issues that may arise later, particularly, as the children continue to grow and eventually leave the home. Additionally, stepparents who identify fundamental differences between their self and their spouse, either because the attitude of their spouse has changed or because they have identified new personal goals, feel uncertain about the effect those differences may have on their marriage over time.

These findings are also congruent with the existing body of knowledge surrounding partner differences. Knobloch and Solomon (2002b) found that fundamental differences between partners can create conflict and ultimately threaten the relationship. Additionally, although a significant body of research does not currently exist on the effect of age differences on stepparent-biological parent marriages, Goldscheider & Kaufman (2006) do note that age, education, and availability of resources does have an influential role on the decision to enter a

stepfamily relationship, however, it is currently unknown as to whether or not age has a significant effect on the longevity of established marriages.

An added source of conflict for stepparents can come from their spouse interfering with their ability to achieve desired goals. Stepparents who perceive their partners as an interference or hindrance will often times question the partner's motives, trust, and commitment to the relationship and find the partner's actions in the relationship as more negative overall. If a spouse interferes with the building and maintenance of intimacy within the relationship, the stepparent will question their commitment to the relationship, however, if a stepparent perceives the spouse as interfering or undermining their ability to effectively parent the stepchild, the stepparent will question the spouse's commitment to coparenting. These findings are congruent with Theiss and Knobloch (2009) and Scheinfeld and Worley (2018) who found that individuals who experience more partner interference appraised partner and relationship irritations as more severe, thus increasing the experiences of uncertainty for stepparents.

Does this mean that stepfamilies are doomed to failure? Neither RTM, nor any other theory, can predict the answer to that. There has been little doubt that children create tension in relationships, but this seems to be the standard of living for stepparents (Ceballo et al., 2004). Clarke-Stewart and Brentano (2006) found that the most common source of conflict for stepparent marriages is the stepchild(ren) and that that particular conflict poses a serious risk to the marriage itself. The application of RTM to the experiences of stepparents supports that notion. This research supports the conceptions that stepparents experience both relational uncertainty and partner interference surrounding issues relating to parenting their stepchildren. Unfortunately for stepparents, this also means that their marriage will experience a great deal of turmoil (Brown & Manning; 2009; Ceballo, Lansford, Abbey, & Stewart, 2004; Knobloch &

Theiss, 2010) which both the stepparent and their spouse must learn to navigate effectively in order to ensure a healthy, positive, and long-lasting marriage (Brown, 2017).

An extra discovery in the research, although unintentional, was a notion of *uniqueness*. In one way or another, each stepparent expressed the belief that their experience was unique in comparison to the experiences of other stepparents. Some participants believed the context surrounding their meeting and eventual transition into stepfamily life to be unusual and somehow fundamentally different and unique from how other stepfamily relationships begin while other stepparents expressed a belief that their difficulties, complications, and struggles within stepfamily life were unique and, in some ways, could not be compared to the experiences of other stepparents. This, of course, begs the question of whether or not this perceived uniqueness of experience influenced or encouraged stepparents to participate in this research. Rennie (2011) argues that there is a moral component that pushes people to participate in research, either because they may be able to prevent harm to others or because they believe that their contribution can contribute to the existing body of knowledge and be used for the benefit of future generations. However, supported by Krok-Schoen, Palmer-Wackerly, Dailey, and Krieger (2015), another argument could be made, which suggests that they see themselves as different and therefore alone in the world with their experience, thus making them crave connection with others thereby diminishing their sense of aloneness. Either argument could support the reasoning behinds the motivation of stepparents to participate in this research, however, both are strictly unsupported assumptions considering answering the question of why stepparents participated is beyond the scope of this research.

Additionally, these findings could find more practical use within the area of individual or family clinical practice. With practitioners admitting that "little attention is paid to the special

qualities" (Lebow, 2018, p. 5) of stepfamilies and wanting to "continue to learn in depth about this ubiquitous family form" (Lebow, 2018, p. 6), information regarding the personal experiences of stepparents could help improve the efficacy of family counseling and intervention programs. Increased knowledge concerning stepparent experiences can influence the existing discourse concerning stepfamilies and help it "move beyond simply being about point-of-view" (Lebow, 2018, p. 4).

In conclusion, each stepparent experience is unique, yet common. While the specific experience is unique in that it is an interaction between unique individuals, the core experiences within the context of stepfamilies remains the same regardless of the individual or family structure. Every stepparent experiences uncertainty in one regard or another, and the source and type of uncertainty is influenced by a number of factors, often times with one experience of uncertainty influencing or generating a separate form of uncertainty. Stepparents seem to experience uncertainty and partner interference in a never-ending cycle with some moments in the marriage characterized by greater amounts of uncertainty and other moments characterized by lesser amounts, however, stepparents and their spouses should understand that the key to a positive and prosperous marriage lies in navigating the turbulent waters of relationship conflict through efficient and effective communication.

Limitations

While this research did contribute to a better understanding of the experiences of stepparents within the context of their marriage, the study was not without its limitations. First, the language of the interview questions seemed unnecessarily complex for several participants. Although the use of the word *uncertain* is pivotal to the study and connects directly with the application of RTM, it was confusing for some participants and therefore was replaced for

suitable substitutes in later interviews. The assumption regarding the confusion surrounding the use of language is that, although individuals may be familiar with the word *uncertain*, its use within the context of relationships was foreign. In later interviews, the word *uncertain* was replaced by *unsure* which generated the same results. For example, on the interview guide, question nine's original text read "Do your parenting difficulties ever leave you feeling uncertain about the future of your marriage?" but after conducting a couple interviews, question nine was verbally asked as "Do your parenting difficulties ever leave you feeling unsure about the future of your marriage?"

A second limitation of the study is the study was the inclusion criteria. A significant number of individuals were interested in participating but did not meet the inclusion criteria of being married. Although they were not married to their partner, they still considered themselves stepparents to their partner's child(ren) and therefore believed they could be of benefit to the study. Additionally, a few of the interested parties actually displayed anger and disappointment that they could not contribute simply because they were not married, suggesting that the inclusion criteria somehow fit an existing norm that a non-biological caregiver is considered a less valuable resource unless they are married to the biological parent.

Another limitation of this study is the lack of generalizability of the results. Out of the 6 interviews that were conducted only one participant, Marty, was male, and only one participant, Carmen, was African-American. Additionally, all participants were in heterosexual marriages. The lack of diversity among participants supports the argument that accurate depictions of the experiences of stepfathers, African-American and other ethnic groups, and those in non-heteronormative marriages are not present or at least underrepresented in the findings.

Future Directions

As this research follows Mikicki-Enyart, Wilder, and Barber's (2017) emerging

qualitative application of RTM, there are several possible future directions for this research. One

possible direction for this research would be to narrow down the inclusion criteria and focus on a

specific subset of stepparents such as stepfathers. During recruitment there was limited response

from stepfathers which could suggest that either they do not consider their experiences to be

valuable to society at large or that they fall victim to established gender roles that encourage men

to be more reserved emotionally, thus preventing them from seeking support from other

stepparents. Research aimed at illustrating the uncertainty experienced by stepfathers could help

encourage other stepfathers to be more open and forthcoming with their stepfamily experiences

and create a more stable foundation for other stepfathers.

A second possible direction for future research could be in redefining the application of

the term *long-standing unions* used by Mikicki-Enyart et al. (2017) to include individuals who

are not married but have been in a romantic relationship for a designated amount of time and

self-identify as a stepparent. During the recruitment process, a significant amount of interest was

garnered by individuals who fit this criterion but, as a result of not being married, did not fit the

inclusion criteria of this study. Individuals who fit this criterion seemed highly motivated to

share their experiences. Data collected from this group could provide a better understanding of

uncertainty and its influence on the decision-making process surrounding entering marriage.

Another possible future direction for this research could be in the exploration of methods

of uncertainty reduction pertaining specifically to stepfamily marriages. Throughout the

interview process, participants offered some insights about their methods of uncertainty

reduction, however, as methods of uncertainty reduction were outside the scope of this research,

no systematic inquiry was made concerning participants' methods not was the data analyzed

regarding methods and patterns of uncertainty reduction provided by the participants. Future

research focusing on uncertainty reduction methods within stepfamilies could benefit the existing

body of knowledge regarding not only uncertainty reduction but also conflict management in

general, providing an improved understanding of the complexities of interpersonal relationships.

References

Allen, E. S., Baucom, D. H., Burnett, C. K., Epstein, N., & Rankin-Esquer, L. A. (2001).
Decision-making power, autonomy, and communication in remarried spouses compared
with first-married spouses. *Family Relations, 50*, 326-334.

Baxter, L. A., Braithwaite, D. O., Bryant, L., & Wagner, A. (2004). Stepchildren's perceptions of
the contradictions in communication with stepparents. *Journal of Social and Personal
Relationships, 21*, 447-467. doi.org/10.1177/0265407504044841

Braun, V. & Clarke,V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in
Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101. doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Brown, S. L. (2017). *Families in America*. University of California Press

Brown, S.L. & Manning, W.D. (2009). Family boundary ambiguity and the measurement of
family structure: The significance of cohabitation. *Demography, 46*(1), 85-101.

Bowen, G. A. (2006). Grounded theory and sensitizing concepts. *International Journal of
Qualitative Methods, 5*(3), 12-23.

Bulcroft, R. A., Carmody, D. C., & Bulcroft, K. (1998). Family structure and patterns of
independence giving to adolescents: Variations by age, race, and gender of child. *Journal
of Family Issues,* 19(4), 404-435.

Campbell, L., Butzer, B., & Wong, J. (2008). The importance of the organization of partner
knowledge in understanding perceptions of relationship quality and conflict resolution
behavior in married couples. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 34*(6), 723-740.
doi.org/10.1177/0146167208315355

Ceballo, R., Lansford, J. E., Abbey, A., & Stewart, A. J. (2004). Gaining a child: Comparing the

    experiences of biological parents, adoptive parents, and stepparents. *Family Relations,*

    53(1), 38-48.

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd edition). Sage.

Clarke-Stewart, A. & Brentano, C. (2006). *Divorce: Causes and consequences.* Yale University

    Press

Degarmo, D. S. & Forgatch, M. S. (2002). Identity salience as a moderator of psychological and

    marital distress in stepfather families. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 65*(3), 266-284.

Degarmo, D. S., Patras, J., & Eap, S. (2008). Social support for divorced fathers' parenting:

    Testing a stress-buffering model. *Family Relations, 57*(1), 35-48.

Drobnick, R. (2018, July 8). *5 ways men & women communicate differently*. PsychCentral.

    https://psychcentral.com/blog/6-ways-men-and-women-communicate-differently/

Egeren, L. A. & Hawkins, D. P. (2004). Coming to terms with coparenting: implications of

    definition and measurement. *Journal of Adult Development, 11*(3), 165-178.

    doi.org/10.1023/B:JADE.0000035625.74672.0b

Feinburg, M. E., Kan, M. L., & Hetherington, E. M. (2007). The longitudinal influence of

    coparenting conflict on parental negativity and adolescent maladjustment. *Journal of*

    Marriage and Family, 69(3), 687-702. doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2007.00400.x

Fincham, F. D. (Feb., 2003). Marital conflict: Correlates, structure, and context. *Current*

    Directions in Psychological Science, 12(1), 23-27.

Fine, M. A., Ganong, L. H., & Coleman, M. (1997). The relation between role constructions and

    adjustment among stepfathers. *Journal of Family Issues, 18*(5), 503-525.

Fitzpatrick, M. A., Fallis, F., & Vance, L. (1982). Multifunctional coding of conflict resolution

strategies in marital dyads. *Family Relations, 31*(1), 61-70.

Ganong, L. & Coleman, M. (2014). Qualitative research on family relationships. *Journal of*

Social and Personal Relationships, 31(4), 451-459. doi.org/10.1177/0265407514520828

Ganong, L., Coleman, M., Chapman, A., & Jamison, T. (2018). Stepchildren claiming

stepparents. *Journal of Family Issues, 39*(6), 1712-1736.

doi.org/10.1177/1092513X17725878

Ganong, L., Coleman, M., Fine, M., & Martin, P. (1999). Stepparents' affinity-seeking and

affinity-maintaining strategies with stepchildren. *Journal of Family Issues, 20*(3), 299-

327. doi.org/10.1177/019251399020003001

Ganong, L. H., Coleman, M., & Jamison, T. (2011). Patterns of stepchild – stepparent

relationship development. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 73*(2), 396-413.

doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00814.x

Getting Married: An Overview. (2020, March 27). NOLO. https://www.nolo.com/legal-

encyclopedia/getting-married-overview-29966.html

Gold, J. M. & Adeyemi, O. (2013). Stepfathers and noncustodial fathers: Two men, one role. *The*

Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families, 21(1), 99-103.

doi.org/10.1177/1066480712456829

Goldscheider, F. & Kaufman, G. (2006). Willingness to stepparent: Attitudes about partners who

already have children. *Journal of Family Issues, 27*(10), 1415-1436.

doi.org/10.1177/0192513X06289646

Hess, J. A. & Coffelt, T. A. (2012). Verbal communication about sex in marriage: Patterns of language use and its connection with relational outcomes. *The Journal of Sex Research, 49*(6), 603-612.

Intimacy. (2019, December 20). Good Therapy. https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/psychpedia/intimacy

Jeffries, V. (2000). Virtue and marital conflict: A theoretical formulation and research agenda. *Sociological Perspectives, 43*(2), 231-246.

Jenkins, J. E. & Zunguze, S. T. (1998) The relationship of family structure to adolescent drug use, peer affiliation and perception of peer acceptance of drug use. *Adolescence, 33*(132), 811-822.

Jensen, D. H. (2011). Toward a theology of parenting. *Parenting* (85-117). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress

Jensen, T. M. (2017). Constellations of dyadic relationship quality in stepfamilies: A factor mixture model. *Journal of Family Psychology, 31*(8), 1051-1062. doi.org/10.1037/fam0000355

Jensen, T. M. & Ganong, L. H. (2019). Stepparent–Child relationship quality and couple relationship quality: Stepfamily household type as a moderating influence. *Journal of Family Issues,* 00(0), 1-22. doi.org/10.1177/0192513X19881669

Jensen, T. M., Lippold, M. A., Mills-Koonce, R., & Fosco, G. M. (2018). Stepfamily relationship quality and children's internalizing and externalizing problems. *Family Process, 57*(2), 477-495. doi.org/10.1111/famp.12284

Jensen, T. M. & Shafer, K. (2013). Stepfamily functioning and closeness: Children's views on

    second marriages and stepfather relationships. *Social Work, 58*(2), 127-136.

    doi.org/10.1093/sw/swt007

Jones, A. C. (2003). Reconstructing the stepfamily: Old myths, new stories. *Social Work, 48*(2),

    228-236.

Kefalas, M. J., Furstenberg, F. F., Carr, P. J., & Napolitano, L. (2011). Marriage is more than

    being together: The meaning of marriage for young adults. *Journal of Family Issues,*

    32(7), 845-875. doi.org/10.1177/0192513X10397277

Knobloch,L. K., Sharabi, L. L., Delaney, A. L., & Suranne, S. M. (2016). The role of relational

    uncertainty in topic avoidance among couples with depression. *Communication*

    Monographs, 83(1), 25-48. doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2014.998691

Knobloch, L. K. & Solomon, D. H. (1999) Measuring the sources and content of relational

    uncertainty. *Communication Studies, 50*(4), 261-278.

    doi.org/10.1080/10510979909388499

Knobloch, L. K. & Solomon, D. H. (2002a). Intimacy and the magnitude and experience of

    episodic relational uncertainty within romantic relationships. *Personal Relationships,*

    9(4), 457-478. doi.org/10.1111/1475-6811.09406

Knobloch, L. K. & Solomon, D. H. (2002b). Information seeking beyond initial interaction:

    Negotiating relational uncertainty within close relationships. *Human Communication*

    Research, 28(2), 243-257. doi.org/10.1093/hcr/28.2.243

Knobloch, L. K. & Solomon, D. H. (2005). Relational uncertainty and relational information

    processing: Questions without answers?. *Communication Research, 32*(3), 349-388.

    doi.org/10.1177/0093650205275384

Knobloch, L. K. & Theiss, J. A. (2010). An actor-partner interdependence model of relational

    turbulence: Cognitions and emotions. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships,*

    27(5), 595-619. doi.org/10.1177/0265407510368967

Krok-Schoen, J. L., Palmer-Wackerly, A. L., Dailey, P. M., & Krieger, J. L. (2015). The

    conceptualization of self-identity among residents of appalachia ohio. *Journal of*

    Appalachian Studies, 21(2), 229-246.

Lebow, J. L. (2018). Editorial: Step-families in family therapy and family science. *Family*

    Process, 57(1), 3-6. doi.org/10.1111/famp.12346

Ledermann, T., Bodenmann, G., Rudaz, M., & Bradbury, T. N. (2010). Stress, communication,

    and marital quality in couples. *Family Relations, 59*(2), 195-206.

Loehlin, J. C., Horn, J. M., & Ernst, J. L. (2009). Parent-child closeness studied in adoptive

    families. Personality and Individual Differences, 48, 149-154.

    doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2009.09.012

Marks, L. D., Hopkins, K., Chaney, C., Monroe, P. A., Nesteruk, O., & Sasser, D. D. (2008).

    Together, we are strong: A qualitative study of happy, enduring african american

    marriages. *Family Relations, 57*(2), 172-185.

Marriage, Family, & Stepfamily Statistics. (2019, December 15). Smart Stepfamilies.

    https://www.smartstepfamilies.com/smart-help/marriage-family-stepfamily-statistics

Marriage and Divorce. (n.d.). American Psychological Association online.

    https://www.apa.org/topics/divorce

Marsiglio, W. (2004). When stepfathers claim stepchildren: A conceptual analysis. *Journal of*

    Marriage and Family, 66(1), 22-39. doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2004.00002.x

Meaning and Purpose. (2020, March 27). For Your Marriage.

https://www.foryourmarriage.org/meaning-and-purpose/

Meteyer, K. B. & Perry-Jenkins, M. (2009). Dyadic parenting and children's externalizing

symptoms. *Family Relations, 58*(3), 289-302.

Mikucki-Enyart, S. L., Wilder, S. E., & Barber, H. (2017). Was it all smoke and mirrors?;

Applying the relational turbulence model to adult children's experience of late-life

parental divorce. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 34*(2), 209-234.

doi.org/10.1177/0265407516629226

Miller, T. (2010). It's a triangle that's difficult to square: Men's intentions and practices around

caring, work and first-time fatherhood. *Fathering, 8*(3), 362-387.

doi.org/10.3149/fth.0803.362

Miller, A., Cartwright, C., & Gibson, K. (2017). Stepmothers' perceptions and experiences of the

wicked stepmother stereotype. *Journal of Family Issues, 39*(7), 1984-2006.

doi.org/10.1177/0192513X17739049

National Stepfamily Day: September 16, 2018. (2018). In *United States Census Bureau online*.

https://www.census.gov/newsroom/stories/2018/stepfamily

Patrick, S., Sells, J. N., Giordano, F. G., & Tollerud, T. R. (2007). Intimacy, differentiation, and

personality variables as predictors of marital satisfaction. *The Family Journal:*

Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families, 15(4), 359-367.

doi.org/10.1177/1066480707303754

Rennie, S. (2011). Viewing research participation as a moral obligation: In whose interests? *The*

Hastings Center Report, 41(2), 40-47.

Roberts, L. J. (2000). Fire and ice in marital communication: Hostile and distancing behaviors as predictors of marital distress. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 62*(3), 693-707.

Robinson, L. C. & Blanton, P. W. (1993). Marital strengths in enduring marriages. *Family Relations, 42*(1), 38-45.

Saint-Jacques, M. C., Robitaille, C., Godbout, E., Parent, C., Drapeau, S., & Gagne, M. H. (2011). The processes distinguishing stable from unstable stepfamily couples: A qualitative analysis. *Family Relations, 60*(5), 545-561.

Sandberg, J. G., Miller, R. B., & Harper, J. M. (2002). A qualitative study of marital process and depression in older couples. *Family Relations, 51*(3), 256-264.

Sanner, C. & Coleman, M. (2017). (Re)constructing family images: Stepmotherhood before biological motherhood. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 79*(5), 1462-1477. doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12428

Scheinfeld, E. & Worley, T. (2018). Understanding the parent-child relationship during the transition into college and emerging adulthood using the relational turbulence theory. *Communication Quarterly, 66*(4), 444-462. doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2018.1443954

Schmeeckle, M. (2007). Gender dynamics in stepfamilies: Adult stepchildren's views. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 69*(1), 174-189.

Schneewind, K. A. & Gerhard, A. (2002). Relationship personality, conflict resolution, and marital satisfaction in the first 5 years of marriage. *Family Relations, 51*(1), 63-71.

Schrodt, P. (2011). Stepparents' and nonresidential parents' relational satisfaction as a function of coparental communication in stepfamilies. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 28*(7), 983-1004. doi.org/10.1177/0265407510397990

Schrodt, P., Baxter, L. A., McBride, M. C., Braithwaite, D. O., & Fine, M. A. (2006). The

    divorce decree, communication, and the structuration of coparenting relationships in

    stepfamilies. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 23*(5), 741-759.

    doi.org/10.1177/0265407506068261

Shapiro, D, N. & Stewart, A. J. (2011). Parenting stress, perceived child regard, and depressive

    symptoms among stepmothers and biological mothers. *Family Relations, 60*(5), 533-544.

Shapiro, D. (2014). Stepparents and parenting stress: The roles of gender, marital quality, and

    views about gender roles. *Family Process, 53*(1), 97-108. doi.org/10.1111/famp.12062

Solomon, D. H. & Knobloch,L. K. (2001). Relationship uncertainty, partner interference, and

    intimacy within dating relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships,*

    18(6), 804-820. doi.org/10.1177/0265407501186004

Solomon, D. H. & Knobloch, L. K. (2004). A model of relational turbulence: The role of

    intimacy, relational uncertainty, and interference from partners in appraisals of irritations.

    Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 21(6), 795-816.

    doi.org/10.1177/0265407504047838

Speer, R. B. & Trees, A. R. (2007). The push and pull of stepfamily life: The contribution of

    stepchildren's autonomy and connection-seeking behaviors to role development in

    stepfamilies. *Communication Studies, 58*(4), 377-394.

    doi.org/10.1080/10510970701648590

Spruijt, E. & de Goede, M. (1997). Transitions in family structure and adolescent well-being.

    Adolescence, 32(128), 897-912.

Stith, S.M., Amanor-Boadu, Y., Miller, M. S., Menhusen, E., Morgan, C., & Few-Dewo, A. (2011). Vulnerabilities, stressors, and adaptations in situationally violent relationships. *Family Relations, 60*(1), 73-89.

Suanet, B., van der Pas, S., & van Tilburg, T. G. (2013). Who is in the stepfamily?: Change in stepparents' family boundaries between 1992 and 2009. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 75*(5), 1070-1083.

Theiss, J.A. & Knobloch, L. K. (2009). An actor-partner interdependence modelof irritations in romantic relationships. *Communication Research, 36*(4), 510-537. doi.org/10.1177/0093650209333033

Theiss, J. A. & Solomon, D. H. (2006). A relational turbulence model of communication about irritations in romantic relationships. *Communication Research, 33*(5), 391-418. doi.org/10.1177/0093650206291482

Thompson, P. (2008). Desperate housewives?: Communication difficulties and the dynamics of marital (un)happiness. *The Economic Journal, 118*(532), 1640-1669.

Van Den Hoonaard, W. C. (2008). Sensitizing concepts. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (pp. 813-815). SAGE.

Weaver, S. E. & Coleman, M. (2005). A mothering but not a mother role: A grounded theory study of the nonresidential stepmother role. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 22*(4), 477-497. doi.org/10.1177/0265407505054519

Wolfinger, N. H. (1998) The effects of parental divorce on adult tobacco and alcohol consumption. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 39*(3), 254-269.

Yarhouse, M. A. & Nowacki, S. K. (2007). The many meanings of marriage: Divergent

perspectives seeking common ground. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for

Couples and Families, 15*(1), 36-45. doi.org/10.1177/1066480706294047

APPENDIX: Interview Guide

Interview Prompts

1) First things first, can you tell me about your relationship with your partner?

    (primer) How long have you known them?

    (primer) How long have you been married?

    (primer) How did you meet their children?

2) Tell me about the children in your household.

    (primer) How many of them are biologically yours?

    (primer) What is the custody situation?

3) Could you explain your parenting relationship with your non-biological child/children?

    (primer) What are some of the difficulties you have about parenting your non-biological children?

4) How would you describe your parenting approach with your spouse?

    (primer) In what ways are you similar?

    (primer) In what ways are you different?

5) Do you ever run into problems, difficulties, or disagreements when it comes to parenting your non-biological child/children?

    (primer) What is a common problem or disagreement that arises regarding the parenting of your non-biological child/children?

    (primer) How do you and your spouse handle situation?

6) Could you tell me about the other biological parent?

    (primer) Do they play an active role in parenting their biological child/children?

(primer) Does their involvement cause any stress for you regarding your parenting responsibility with your non-biological child/children?

(primer)Does their involvement create any stress between you and your spouse?

7) Do you ever feel uncertain about your role as a parent to you non-biological child/children?

(primer) How so?

8) Do you ever feel uncertain about your ability to co-parent effectively with your spouse?

(primer) How so?

9) Do your parenting difficulties ever leave you feeling uncertain about the future of your marriage?

(primer) How so?

Demographic Information

1) How old is your spouse?

2) What is your current age?

3) How long have you and your spouse been together?

(primer) How long have you been married?

4) How many children are in the house total?

5) What are the ages of the children/child?

6) Roughly what percentage of time are the children with you and your spouse?

(primer) Are there some that stay with you more than others?

VITA

PAUL ELDERWITH TAYLOR III, M.A.

Education: M.A. Communication & Storytelling Studies, East Tennessee

                                    State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2020

                                    B.S. Mass Communications,   East Tennessee State University,

                                    Johnson City, Tennessee, 2018

                                    A.S. Mass Communications, Speech Communications, &

                                    Sociology, Northeast State Community College,

                                    Blountville, Tennessee, 2016

Professional Experience: Graduate Assistant, East Tennessee State University, College of

                                    Arts and Sciences, 2018-2020

Honors and Awards: Who's Who in American Colleges

                                    Outstanding Student, Dept. of Media & Communication, East

                                    Tennessee State University, 2018

                                    Coca-Cola Gold Scholar, Northeast State Community College,

                                    2016

                                    Tennessee All-Academic Team, Northeast State Community

                                    College, 2016

                                    Outstanding Public Relations / Advertising Student, Northeast

                                    State Community College, 2015

Adult Student Learner of the Year, Northeast State Community

College, 2015