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Centered but not Caught in the Middle: Stepchildren's Perceptions of Dialectical Contradictions in the Communication of Co-Parents

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Centered but not Caught in the Middle: Stepchildren's Perceptions of Dialectical Contradictions in the Communication of Co-Parents

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Abstract

The researchers adopted a dialectical perspective to study how stepchildren experience and communicatively manage the perception of feeling caught in the middle between their parents who are living in different households. The metaphor of being caught in the middle is powerful for stepchildren and this metaphor animated their discourse. A central contribution of the present study was to understand the alternative to being caught in the middle and what this alternative means to stepchildren. Reflected in the discourse of stepchildren is that to feel not caught in the middle is to feel centered in the family. Stepchildren's desire to be centered in the family was animated by the dialectic of freedom–constraint, which co-existed within the contradictions of openness–closedness and control–restraint. These contradictions are detailed in the analysis, along with advice to parents from the perspective of stepchildren. Implications for the interaction of stepchildren and their parents are discussed.

Keywords

Stepchildren, Stepfamilies, Communication, Relational Dialectics

> Parents easily agree that their children's interests come first and that children's voices have to be heard. … Children may thus have the ambiguous experience both of being at the centre of the dispute, elevated to a position of extreme importance and power, and of being utterly powerless to prevent what they generally most hate, namely their parents fighting. (Blow & Daniel, 2002, p. 92)

The study of stepfamily life is an important scholarly undertaking as scholars seek to document and understand the complexities of this growing family form. Scholars across disciplines have examined a variety of stepfamily issues, including the development of stepfamilies and what it means to feel like a family (e.g., Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001; McGoldrick & Carter, 1989; Papernow, 1993), perceptions of stepfamily roles (e.g., Baxter, Braithwaite, & Bryant, 2006; Burrell, 1995; Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998; Fine, Ganong, & Coleman, 1999; Schrodt, 2006), privacy and topic avoidance (e.g., Afifi & McManus, 2006; Golish & Caughlin, 2002), conflict (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990; Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001), the post-divorce relationships with the former spouse/nonresidential parent (e.g., Ahrons,

1981; Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Masheter, 1994), and stepfamily strengths (Golish, 2003). Taken together, this growing body of scholarship across disciplines confirms the contention of a number of scholars that the stepfamily is a complex family form warranting additional study and that communication is central to stepfamily concerns.

To date, there is more research into the role and perspective of: the adults in stepfamilies, especially the stepparent; the new marital couple; and, to a lesser extent, the nonresidential parent. Scholars have paid much less attention to what it means to be a child in a stepfamily and especially how children in stepfamilies communicatively negotiate the complex web of relationships and roles in the stepfamily and within their family of origin. The call to investigate children's perspectives on stepfamily life has been echoed by several scholars (Amato, 1994; Braithwaite, McBride, & Schrodt, 2003; Braithwaite, Schrodt, & Baxter, 2006; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Dunn & Booth, 1994; Dunn, Davies, O'Connor, & Sturgess, 2001) and clinicians (e.g., Blow & Daniel, 2002). Mullett and Stolberg (1999) explain, "Children can offer valuable insight into their family's functioning and perhaps be less biased than parents who have just gone through a divorce" (p. 116). Thus, examining the perspective of stepchildren on stepfamily communication was the focus of the present study.

Communication researchers have found that stepfamily members describe their experiences of stepfamily life by using the metaphor of being "caught in the middle" (Afifi, 2003; Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Golish & Caughlin, 2002). Focusing on family metaphors is a powerful way to understand family life. Yerby (1989) argued, "Metaphors can represent some aspect of the family's collective experience, value system, ideology, or world view. Metaphors can also describe how a family frames or gives meaning to the particular circumstances and developmental changes that confront the family" (p. 50). Similarly, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explained, "New metaphors have the power to create a new reality. This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it" (p. 145). Understanding the metaphor of being caught in the middle may help members of stepfamilies manage and negotiate the changes or challenges occurring within their family structures. In addition, this metaphor may reflect the feelings of helplessness stepfamily members often experience in the face of conflict (Buzzanell & Burrell, 1997). In the current study, the researchers focused attention on the metaphor of being caught in the middle that stepchildren used to describe interactions with their parents following divorce.

Members of stepfamilies are particularly susceptible to feeling caught in the middle as they must negotiate and renegotiate roles, rules, and expectations (Afifi, 2003; Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998; Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Scholars have begun studying this phenomenon of being caught in the middle in terms of triangulation and the coalitions formed among family members (Afifi, 2003; Baxter et al., 2006; Ganong & Coleman, 1994). While researchers have helped us understand how stepfamily members feel caught in the middle and manage privacy boundaries, we sought here to understand this phenomenon better from the children's perspective and to examine how stepchildren understand and communicatively negotiate this center ground in stepfamily life. If stepchildren do not want to be caught in the middle, metaphorically, where do they want to reside in stepfamilies? To address these concerns, the researchers centered the present study in the theory of relational dialectics.

Relational Dialectics Theory

Using relational dialectics (Baxter, 2006; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), the researchers focused on stepchildren's perceptions of communication and the metaphor of feeling caught in the middle in stepfamilies. Rawlins (1989) argued that dialectical tensions are often brought to light in the metaphors that people use to talk about their relationships. As such, the goal of the present study was to identify the

discourses that children in stepfamilies perceive animate communication with their parents and between their parents. Dialectically oriented scholars view relating as a dialogic communicative process characterized by the unity of oppositional tendencies (Baxter, 2004, 2006) that constitute a relationship (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Baxter (2006) highlighted the usefulness of this theory to study families:

> The dialogic move is one of recognizing that family life is a both/and experience—families gain their meanings from the give-and-take interplay of multiple, competing themes or perspectives, for example, the discourse of "intimacy" and the discourse of "independence." No theme or perspective is better or worse than its opposites—their interplay is what is important. (p. 131)

Relational dialectics scholars focus on the dialogic and multivocal qualities of relating as they analyze the oppositional tendencies inherent in personal relationships (Baxter, 2006; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Baxter (2006) described, "Contradictory voices permeate communication, and it is their interplay that constructs meaning for family members" (p. 132). From a relational dialectics perspective, relating is understood by identifying the primary discourses that animate the communication of relational parties (Baxter, 2006; Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). Scholars using this theory focus on the constitutive nature of communication and the joint communicative actions of relating parties as they co-create both the relationship and themselves (Baxter, 2004; Baxter & Braithwaite, in press).

Scholars have found relational dialectics to be a fruitful theory to help understand the complex, multivocal interactions of stepfamilies (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004; Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998; Cissna et al., 1990) and to study the complexities and challenges of family interaction (e.g., Toller, 2005). Based on the findings of these scholars, we approached the interaction of stepchildren with adults in different households to identify the contradictory discourses that animate their communication as children experienced feeling caught in the middle. Because of the breadth of issues and complexity of stepfamilies, we chose, in the present study, to limit our main focus to the interaction of children and their parents in stepfamilies. The research questions guiding this study were:

> RQ1:   What contradictions are perceived by stepchildren to characterize interaction when they feel caught in the middle between their parents?

> RQ2:   What communication advice do young adult stepchildren have for their parents regarding feeling caught in the middle?

Answering these questions will assist professionals working with stepfamilies and parents in stepfamilies to comprehend the challenges these children face. The goal was to understand communication in the stepfamily better and to focus on context-specific, participant-centered applications (Cissna, 2000; Eadie, 2000; Whitchurch & Webb, 1995). Specifically, the present study was designed to elicit the perspectives of stepchildren concerning how to address problematic situations that arise in interactions between themselves and their co-parents. We believe that stepchildren possess unique knowledge regarding how communication among and between stepchildren and their parents can be managed and improved. Ganong and Coleman (1994) spoke of the contributions of qualitative researchers studying stepfamilies, arguing that this scholarship can help "bridge the division between clinicians and researchers" (p. 234).

Method

The researchers situated the study in the interpretive paradigm, following the precedent of other scholars pursuing dialectically based studies of stepfamily life. The interpretive paradigm was especially well-suited for the present study, as interpretive researchers focus on questions of meaning from the perspective of the actors themselves (Baxter, 2004; Baxter & Babbie, 2004) and on "material practices

that make the world visible" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Interpretive scholars seek intelligibility and understanding by identifying the similarities in meanings that phenomena or processes hold for the informants, rather than focusing on between-group differences (Bochner, 1985; Creswell, 1998; Leininger, 1994). Interpretive communication researchers focus on symbolic modes of expression for their patterns of meaning. In the present study, the researchers interacted with stepchildren in a series of focus group interviews in order to understand stepfamily communication from the perspectives of stepchildren.

Participants

The research team conducted eight focus groups over a three-month period, with an average of four participants per group. The researchers chose to interview young adult stepchildren, as we expected they would have had the opportunity to reflect on their stepfamily experiences. All participants met the following selection criteria: they were 19 years of age or older, a stepfamily member for a minimum of a year, and had lived with one or both parents during the last seven years. Groups included moderators and 28 participants, 18 females and 10 males. The mean age of participants was 20.29 years (SD=2.11 years), and most were Caucasian (94%). The mean age of the participants at the time of their parent's remarriage was 10.29 years (SD=3.72), and the mean duration of the stepfamilies at the time of the interviews was 9.8 years (SD=4.26 years). Using Ganong and Coleman's (1994) description of stepfamily types, six of the participants were members of simple stepfamily structures (one parent brings children to the stepfamily). The remaining 22 participants were members of complex stepfamily structures (both spouses have children from prior relationships).

Procedures

The researchers chose focus groups over individual interviews in order to create an opportunity for young adult stepchildren to interact with one another in a conversational environment where they could "both query each other and explain themselves to each other" (Morgan, 1996, p. 139). Hedges (1985) explained that informants may find a focus group format quite stimulating and that this method may elicit a variety of important issues; "There is more to react to, more food for thought, more diversity of opinion expressed than in a typical individual interview" (p. 73). Given the nature of group discussions, the goal was that experiences participants had forgotten or might not think about in a traditional interview would come to the forefront as other focus group participants described their own experiences.

Two members of the research team co-facilitated each focus group. The job of the focus group facilitator is to keep the group structured and on topic, while giving all participants an opportunity to talk and drawing out more reserved participants (Morgan, 1992). Each focus group began with a discussion of the purpose of the study and the human subjects consent process. Following this, participants completed a demographic "family tree" about their stepfamily structure developed by Baxter et al. (1999). The co-facilitators then asked participants to describe how the adults in the different households should communicate with one another and how they actually do communicate. The co-facilitators ended the focus group by asking participants to work as a group and design a brochure that would give adults co-raising children advice on how to communicate. Groups lasted between 70 and 90 minutes. Each focus group was video- and audio-taped with the participants' permission.

Data Analysis

The interview tapes were transcribed verbatim, and data for the present study were 493 pages of interview transcripts and the brochures created by the focus groups.[1] Members of the research team began by

studying the brochures and reading through all of the transcripts several times in order to gain familiarity with the data set as a whole. The team met twice to discuss initial observations regarding these data.

The research team used an interpretive analytic technique to identify discourses that animated the communication of these adults and children (Lindlof, 1995). This process involved an interpretive process of creating categories in order to capture major themes relevant to the aims of the study. This inductive process involved two stages of analysis. The first stage of the analysis was organized around Spradley's (1979) attribution semantic relationship where "X is an attribute (characteristic) of Y." The second stage of analysis consisted of finding connections among the categories. Adopting a dialectical lens, the researchers used an inductive and iterative process to identify simultaneous opposites in the discourse of the participants. The analysis was oriented around Spradley's (1979) semantic relationship of strict inclusion: "X is a kind of Y," where "contradiction" became the "Y." Two main contradictions were identified, and we set aside non-dialectical themes for a future study. The research team worked together to check, critically analyze, and refine the analysis, and to identify any rival explanations of the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Differences were minor and were resolved in discussion.

Results

In the present study, the researchers explored how stepchildren experience and communicatively manage being caught in the middle between parents who live in different households. We also sought stepchildren's advice regarding how parents could best communicate with them and with each other. We paid particular attention to what it meant to be *not* caught in the middle in stepfamilies, repeatedly asking the question: if children do not want to be caught in the middle, metaphorically, where did they want to be located in the stepfamily? What was clear in stepchildren's discourse is that they want to be *centered* in the family while, at the same time, they want to avoid being caught in the middle. The researchers came to understand the desire to be centered as representing specific advice stepchildren had for their parents.

Two pictures drawn by focus group members demonstrate this concept of being centered but not caught in the middle. In Figure 1, a focus group illustrated feeling caught in the middle by drawing a stepchild whose arms and legs are being stretched by adult hands to the far corners of the paper. In contrast, in Figure 2, another focus group drew a smiling stepchild who stands happily between two sets of parents. The stepchild and parents are all connected to one another by hearts. The group explained that the hearts represented communication.

Negotiating Freedom and Constraint

Guided by relational dialectics theory, the main contradiction identified in the present study was similar to the autonomy–connection dialectic initially identified by Baxter and Montgomery (1996); however, the stepchildren in our study reflected on this phenomenon by invoking the metaphor of being caught in the middle. What emerged in these data was that stepchildren wanted the *freedom* communicatively to negotiate and enact the desired relationships with their parents. At the same time, these stepchildren had to manage the *constraints* resulting from parental communication, both when parents cooperated with one another and, especially, when they did not.

Dialectical theorists use the concept of totality to encourage scholars to view oppositional discourses as co-existing and interdependent. From a relational dialectics perspective, totality implies that these co-present discourses should be viewed as a knot or web (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Based on the concept of totality, we identified additional discourses that function as radiants of meaning of the freedom–constraint dialectic: openness–closedness and control–restraint.

In the analysis, we incorporated the advice that children articulated as we sought to understand stepchildren's desire to be centered but not caught in the middle. The goal was to illuminate these discourses and provide both co-parents and professionals working with stepfamilies the stepchildren's advice on how to achieve centered ground within stepfamily life.

The Dialectic of Expression: Openness and Closedness

In the present analysis, we saw openness–closedness as a radiant of freedom–constraint as we focused on how both revealing and concealing information impacted the relationship and interaction of stepchildren with one or both of their parents. As we analyzed openness–closedness, we concentrated on stepchildren's perceptions of: (a) taking on adult concerns; (b) navigating parental openness–closedness; and (c) navigating stepchild–parent openness–closedness. We end this section with stepchildren's advice for parental communication to help children feel centered rather than caught in the middle.

Taking on adult concerns: "I know you guys don't need to be hearing this."

In the focus groups, we heard many examples of stepchildren being exposed to information and concerns during their childhood that were beyond what most children are expected to know about or handle. For example, the stepchildren gave examples of hearing negative information about one or both of their parents or being privy to details about a parent's marital woes, dating, or financial circumstances. On one hand, stepchildren indicated that they appreciated having this information, as they wanted to understand what was happening in their family and with their parents. On the other hand, at the same time stepchildren believed their parents' openness constrained them and their relationships with each other. For example, one 22-year-old male described to the group how he felt compelled to comfort his mother when she told him about her problems:

> My mom … I mean, knowing what I know now, of course I didn't know what the heck was going on, I thought that I could nurture her, or tell her "It's going to be okay," and maybe she liked that … she told us her problems, and you know, she would always say, "I know you guys don't need to be hearing this, and I shouldn't be saying this," … she would constantly cry … (2:445–454; note: parenthetical notations are focus group number and line numbers from the transcript)

Like this participant, many of the stepchildren talked about how they wanted to be shielded from adult problems, but they also wanted to know what was going on in their family.

One adult concern that was raised in all of the focus groups was regarding parental finances. Many of the stepchildren found exposure to parents' financial information, and the lifestyle changes following the divorce and stepfamily formation, difficult. One 25-year-old female participant reflected back on her feelings after she, her sibling, and her mother moved from the family house into a trailer home. She explained:

> We lived in this like trailer with my mom … right after the divorce, and that was a point of contention, because we were like, "We want our house back, you know we want our rooms, we want our own rooms back … why do we have to live in this stupid trailer?" We didn't understand obviously that it takes money to live in a house. (2:402–408)

Another woman talked about the difficulties of hearing about and having to manage financial matters between parents when she was in grade school: "Well, 'Tell your Dad he needs to pay this.' … 'Tell your Mom to bring that money back with you on Sunday.' … It was more of a burden because then I started worrying about that" (2:587–594). For these stepchildren, one aspect of being caught between their parents was taking on what they considered adult concerns. While this information often gave them

freedom to navigate with and, at times, around their parents, they often found adult concerns constraining and difficult to understand and manage.

Navigating parental openness–closedness: "You are forced to communicate a nasty message."

In the focus groups, the stepchildren talked about feeling caught when parents were unable or unwilling to manage the openness–closedness dialectic themselves. They reported experiencing difficulties when they found themselves managing information they believed should be the purview of parents. This was especially problematic when these stepchildren were used as go-betweens by their parents, as this example illustrates:

> I always use the metaphor of the bone between two dogs. I always felt like, because my parents did not talk to one another and if it happened where they were forced to talk to one another it was not pretty at all. Sometimes it was just easier to use me too, so they both wouldn't fight, sometimes I willingly took that role so I didn't have to see my parents fight. But it, I didn't feel much like a person, I felt like a plaything. (8:303–308)

While parental openness was difficult for these stepchildren, closedness between adults was even more challenging at times. These children perceived that a lack of openness, or closedness, between their parents affected their relationship with one or both parents, representing constraint rather than the freedom to have an open, unencumbered relationship with both parents. One stepchild explained:

> When it doesn't work, if you're acting as the mediary [*sic*] person, the person that you're talking to, if it's your mom or dad, if they get upset, then they are going to use the same kind of communication to get back to the father or whatever. They'll be like, "Tell your dad this isn't going to work." Then you are forced to communicate a nasty message back to your dad, and it's going to make you look bad because it wasn't nasty in the first place. (1:435–440)

As this example highlights, children often found relationships with one or both parents constrained as they functioned as a go-between when the adults refused to be open and communicate directly.

From the perspective of many of these stepchildren, when the adults avoided interaction with one another, this often increased, rather than reduced, conflict between the households. One female participant told her group that even simple situations, such as determining meeting times and places, would become confused due to her parents' unwillingness to be open with each other. She explained:

> It's just a lot of miscommunication because my dad will tell my sister one thing and she'll … tell my mom … so they wind up driving to the meeting spot and neither side is very specific about when and where to meet. (1:165–169)

This participant and others believed that if their parents established more direct and clear lines of communication with one another, misunderstandings would be less frequent.

Participants also indicated that tensions arose when their parents remained closed over issues of money or personal possessions. In these cases, the children's needs often went unmet. At the same time, when parents invoked openness by including the child in discussions or passing messages through the children, children often felt caught between their parents, constraining their relationship with one or both parents.

Navigating stepchild–parent openness–closedness: "I just really didn't want to hear it though."

Stepchildren described how they felt when parents withheld information from them that stepchildren thought they needed to know. On one hand, children indicated that they wanted their parents to communicate directly with one another and not burden them with adult information. On the other hand, at

the same time participants were distressed or resentful when parents kept information from them or left them out of the conversation. One female participant explained that she was upset when neither of her parents discussed dating other people with her:

When both of my parents decided to be involved with other people they never really sat down and said like, "OK, this is so and so, and this is why daddy is dating." They would come around more and more and … I had no idea what was going on. I was old enough to know that what was going on wasn't right; it wasn't normal, or the way it should be. (2:360–365)

For this participant, tensions emerged as a result of her parents remaining closed with her about their personal lives. This participant described wanting her parents to be open with her about certain, but not all, family issues. Another group member indicated that parental openness with the children is necessary and desirable. He explained:

> They [parents] should tell each other things because a lot of times they would keep secrets and … as a kid, you don't understand, so you go telling things and then you get in trouble and you don't know why. (4:130–133)

Clearly, these stepchildren were looking for parents to manage the openness–closedness dialectic with each other and, in turn, with them.

While stepchildren desired parental openness, they often felt burdened when parents were open with them. Stepchildren relayed many examples of parental openness that made them uncomfortable or compromised their freedom to have the desired relationship with one or both parents. Children expressed how they felt caught in the middle when one parent was open with negative information about the other parent. These stepchildren perceived that their parents expected them to choose sides in these disputes. One male explained, "I knew they would fight on the phone all of the time … it was kind of this game my father was playing, kind of like make the other parent look bad" (7:114–117).

Too much parental openness placed stepchildren in a situation of choosing sides, which further constrained their relationship with both parents and left the stepchildren feeling uncomfortable and confused. The stepchildren discussed the burdens of not knowing what to say, feeling being pulled apart, feeling unwanted by their parents, and doubting their parents, as we saw in this exchange between focus group participants:

> Participant 1: I think it kind of puts the kids in the middle and makes you feel like regardless of what it is the parents think. … I don't know …
>
> Participant 2: You have to lean toward one side or the other.
>
> Participant 1: Yeah, it kind of makes you, like if a dad says I want to see you this time, if that doesn't work for the kid; I mean it's their life, too. Sometimes kids get put in the middle. They almost lose all sense of I want to do this or I want to do that. It's whatever works for you guys. (8:292–300)

For these participants, too much openness left them feeling caught in the middle between their parents, constraining their relationships with them.

Applications for Being Centered: Negotiating Openness–Closedness

Although there were many examples of unsuccessful negotiation of the openness–closedness dialectic, stepchildren also discussed some positive examples of managing this contradiction. Successfully negotiating this contradiction helped stepchildren feel centered in the attention and concern of both parents, rather than caught in the middle between them. When this occurred, children were able to

navigate the relationship with both of their parents; they had the freedom to have a relationship with both parents and to manage successfully the constraints of the situation. One theme articulated by the stepchildren was that they believed parents should put the concerns of their children first. For example, one woman explained, "Think about your kids and not yourself, no matter how much pain you guys have put each other through, the effects of what is going on is going to affect your kids for a long time" (3:556–558).

Participants indicated that putting the children's needs first could be accomplished through what they described as mature and open communication between the parents. One female participant described how her parents now successfully communicate with one another, "They're civil about it and they get along and they take care of things" (4:156). One male stepchild described how his mother and father would argue in the early days after their divorce, but over time they developed more positive ways to communicate, "Cause my mom … always said she would never say anything down or wrong about my dad. She'll let us form our own opinion about how he's doing and vice versa" (3:353–355). For most of the stepchildren we interviewed, what they perceived to be mature and open communication between their parents did not happen overnight, but emerged over time.

For these stepchildren, successful management of the openness–closedness dialectic involved bypassing or involving children judiciously when discussing adult matters. Our participants viewed appropriate levels of openness between adults as anything that kept children from having to deal with adult matters prematurely. One female participant revealed:

> I definitely think that parents should try to keep their baggage away from the kids. … I don't necessarily mean that you shouldn't talk to your kids about it, because the kids don't know what's going on, so they need to like have some sort of discussion, and you should never lie to them. I just, I think that like the petty stuff, the calling each other names and the bickering should be kept away from the kids. (2:341–347)

This sentiment was confirmed repeatedly in the present study. These young adults stressed that it is important for parents to understand that, at their core, the children are just children. Consequently, participants stressed the importance of parents communicating directly with the other adults on matters that are beyond the child's emotional and maturity thresholds.

When citing positive cases of co-parental communication, participants described their parents as being extremely civil to one another and jointly making decisions that impacted the children. As one female participant described:

> They always talked, like if I would do something that was bad or anything, my mom would always consult with my dad most of the time about what the punishment should be even though he wasn't there. … So they worked together really well. (8:319–329)

While participants advised adults to protect children by not telling them everything, it was clear from the discourse of these stepchildren that they wanted to know what was happening, yet at the same time they wanted to be protected. In other words, children were asking that their parents learn to manage the openness–closedness dialectic with each other and with the child. For example, one stepchild explained, "I think that, when they [children] are little … don't show, don't get them involved with the confrontation between you, but kids need to understand so they're not surprised" (2:1331–1333). Another stepchild advised parents:

> I'm not saying you shouldn't talk about it with them [children], but I mean, the dirty laundry stuff, the reasons why you're getting divorced, and like the reasons why you're fighting, the reasons why you hate each other, I don't think you should like, try to pit the kids against the other parent. (2:196–199)

Thus, children felt centered when they knew what was going on in the family and when they were not receiving information that was negative about one or the other parent or information that was beyond their maturity level.

Finally, the focus group members spent considerable time discussing how they were used by one parent to deliver messages to the other. One participant reflected, "I remember when I was little and I was on the phone and I was told, 'Ask your father for child support.' I mean it was just crazy" (4:227–225). Another participant commented, "If my mom needed to tell my dad anything, she'd tell me to tell my dad … I was always a ping pong ball" (5:159–161). These stepchildren found themselves caught in the middle, often with very negative results. When we asked them what they would recommend to parents, they indicated that, in general, parents should not expect children to serve as intermediaries. One stepchild suggested, "Don't use children as a go-between … maybe if they [parents] just communicate with each other, things would just be a little less stressful on the child" (6:1194–1196). While there were times when participants appreciated being gatekeepers of communication, as will be discussed later, as a rule these children advised parents not to use them as go-betweens.

Parents' ability to negotiate successfully the openness–closedness dialectic resulted in children being placed in what they perceived to be their rightful place—centered in the family, as depicted in Figure 2. These parents created an atmosphere where the child felt appropriately placed in the center of the family and parental concern rather than being caught in the middle between parents.

Negotiating the Dialectic of Control–Restraint

During our analysis, we recognized a second, related dialectic concerning how stepchildren communicatively managed control and restraint. In particular, we saw how stepchildren experienced and communicatively negotiated power and dominance when interacting with their parents. Baxter (in press) views power as a dialogic interplay of multiple voices. In fact, Baxter (2004) references stepfamilies as one place to study how parties discursively manage issues of control and dominance. In our analysis, we centered on stepchildren's perceptions of: (a) enacting control; (b) choosing sides; and (c) coping with parental alliances.

Enacting control: "We're getting away with it."

Although stepchildren were, at times, constrained by poor parental communication, they recognized the control gained when they could avoid discipline and "get away with things" because their parents did not communicate with one another. A 20-year-old male participant explained:

> There were certain times, where mom was being childish; we'd play off of it; myself and my brothers would actually play off both our parents, saying, "Well dad lets me do that," or, you know, stuff like that, you know, sometimes we'd make it up to get our way. (2:456–459)

Another participant echoed enacting control between parents:

> I know that I, my mom and I got in a fight; I would always threaten, like threaten to move with my dad, "Well, I'll just move with my dad, then." And, or, um, if I got angry with her, I'd say, "You know, my dad doesn't do this." Or, and so that, in a way, puts my mom in the middle of my relationship with my dad and her, and she has no control over what my dad does. And so that almost puts her in a helpless state. I knew it hurt her, so I said it. I mean, I regret it now, but I did that sometimes. (4:410–415)

From both these examples, it is clear that stepchildren perceived that being caught in the middle positioned them to invoke the freedom pole of the dialectic. One of our participants remarked about the control she was able to enact with her parents when she was able to keep silent and "get away with

things" at her father's house: "We never said anything, because we thought it was special, or we were getting away with something, so we weren't going to be like, 'You shouldn't let us do this'" (2:960–963). While the children reflected back on a lack of discipline somewhat fondly, they also realized that they had missed out on needed parenting. Because they did not want to clue their parents in and experience restraint, this also functioned as a constraint in their relationship. In essence, the children needed to maintain closedness to keep their parents in the dark and avoid discipline in one or both of the houses.

A second way in which stepchildren enacted control in their relationship concerned the influence they had over their parents' dating relationships. Parental openness about dating invoked aspects of both control and restraint for these children. Participants discussed that they desired parental openness about dating, as they would then be able to express their feelings about these new relationships and also enact influence over parental dating. For example, participants believed that they could influence the success of their parent's new relationship because they were often asked to express whether they liked their parent's new partner. At the same time, enacting control over parental dating was a constraint in that participants were hesitant to tell their parent how they really felt about the new partner, particularly when it was evident that their feelings were at odds with how their parent felt toward the new romantic partner. One female participant exemplified this tension when talking about her father and his girlfriend(s):

> My dad always swore up and down that regardless, he's with these women, but he's like, "If you don't like them, then I won't marry them," so it's like, "Then why are you with her?" I don't know, but he always followed through with it. He never stayed with the ones that we didn't like. (3:933–938)

Clearly, for all the constraints being caught in the middle brought to their relationship with one or both parents, it also brought the children additional influence in their relationships with their parents.

Choosing sides: "You don't know who you're supposed to love more."

One topic that was raised in many of the focus groups is what happened when stepchildren perceived that their parents expected them to choose sides. Participants described situations when a parent would present negative information about the other parent and children perceived they were expected to choose sides:

> Mom and dad would be fighting or whatever, and so my mom would like talk to me about it, and try to get me to believe that she was pretty much the right one, and I'd find out that there was another side to the story because I would talk to my dad and he would be upset about it or whatever. So I felt caught in the middle because they wanted me to side with them, but I didn't feel comfortable choosing. (1:182–188)

Choosing sides was further complicated when the stepchild learned the other parent's side of the story. Participants were able to enact control as they were made privy to information about one or both of their parents. At the same time, they experienced restraint as they had to evaluate information that was often very negative about a parent and choose how to respond.

Participants found themselves simultaneously managing the control of being able to choose sides and the restraint in negotiating this middle ground as they attempted to please both of their parents. One female participant revealed, "It confuses you because you don't know who you're supposed to love more and who you're supposed to express that to" (6:278–289).

Stepchildren were also asked to choose sides between parents as they made choices about where they would live. While they appreciated the control associated with being wanted by both parents and being able to choose their residence, they experienced simultaneous restraint that accompanied having to choose one parent over the other. In the end, they perceived costs in their relationship with one or both parents. For the participants, choosing which parent to live with was further complicated when they perceived that

their parents viewed this as competition, and children quickly understood the control this gave them. One female participant explained:

> When I would move places, the hardest thing was I would have to tell the other parent, and they almost felt like they failed in a way. … You know, like that I was choosing that I loved them more. (4:394–399)

Stepchildren described very serious outcomes resulting from feeling they had to choose sides and also please both parents. Several of the participants talked with the other focus group members about needing professional help to deal with the negative outcomes. Sadly, several of the female stepchildren reported that they had experienced eating disorders which they attributed, in part, to the stress of being caught in the middle. Obviously, feeling the need to choose sides represented both control and restraint in the relationship between these children and their parents.

Coping with parental alliances

The last radiant of the control–restraint dialectic concerns stepchild reactions when parents did communicate effectively with one another. Although the participants indicated that they wanted their parents to communicate with one another directly and effectively, direct parental communication often challenged the child's control. The freedom of being able to pit parents against each other quickly dissolved when parents worked together to solve discipline issues. One of our female participants told her group:

> There was a time when my parents actually did communicate. … My mom told me I couldn't come back to live with her … and then I came home with my dad and I got even worse … and that's when they talked. And that's when they both, I felt, were against me, and then I couldn't run to anyone. (4:630–638)

In this example, parental communication resulted in discipline and restraint for the stepchild. In another example, a female participant reflected on her experiences when her mother, father, and stepfather began to work together to discipline her. Although she disliked the feeling of being "ganged up on," she experienced freedom to have a good relationship with both her parents and, in this case, her stepfather. She told the focus group that she now recognizes they were working together for her benefit: "They had to communicate a lot about rules and what they were gonna do with me … it got really bad for a while there, but they were definitely working together" (4:599–602). While stepchildren felt caught in the middle when their parents formed alliances, many described these parental alliances as positive. While they felt "ganged up on" at the time, stepchildren framed parental cooperation as allowing them to be centered in their parents' concerns. Stepchildren felt the alliances between their parents helped them stay out of trouble and let them know their parents cared about them.

Applications for Being Centered: Negotiating Control–Restraint

Negotiating issues of control with and between their parents was important to these stepchildren. On one hand, participants wanted the control that being in the middle afforded them. At the same time control served as a restraint, especially when participants received information that was beyond their maturity level or that made them feel as though they needed to choose between their parents. When they discussed their advice for parents, children stressed that parents need to avoid forcing children to take sides. As one explained, "Don't do the sides game with your kids" (1:238). Some stepchildren cited examples of parents working together to keep children from having to choose between them. One stepchild described to the group how his parents worked out a holiday schedule to avoid tough choices: "My dad will come to Christmas with us and open presents with us, all together, even my stepsiblings" (2:81–82). While some stepchildren indicated that their parents would meet together and come to agreements, other participants indicated that they and their co-parents would work as a group to solve problems. One stepchild

explained, "Involvement of both families to better the environment for the children is a must for stepfamilies" (5:1652–1653). No matter how it was accomplished, stepchildren were looking for their parents to take the lead and find ways to keep children centered and not caught in the middle.

Another way in which children suggested managing the control–restraint dialectic was to enact control when their parents would not or could not do it themselves. In one example, a young man waited until his high school graduation party to, in essence, "lay down the law" with his parents. From his account, both parents had been behaving badly toward one another at his party. He recalled, "I took them both outside and said, 'Well, I'm 18 years old, I've graduated high school and you guys can stay or leave it's up to you'" (7:368–370).

It was very enlightening to hear these young adult stepchildren talk about discipline between their households. When they were younger, they enjoyed being able to get away with behaviors at one or both of their homes when their parents did not communicate effectively. When parents did cooperate, children often resented it at the time, but in the interviews, participants encouraged parents to work together when possible for the good of the children. One young woman described how her parents would come together to talk about issues:

> I would have a say on it; they would have a say on it; and then if they had a problem with each other, they could discuss it afterwards. Even now, with my brother and sister living in the different households, the punishments are talked about together. (7:746–748)

While not all co-parents are able to work this cooperatively, these stepchildren stressed that it is important for parents to develop ways of interacting and cooperating that will work best for the children. Ultimately, the goal is to help children realize the freedom of having a close relationship with both of their parents with the necessary constraints for their guidance and protection. In this way, children will believe they are in their rightful place in the family.

Discussion

In the present study, the researchers adopted a dialectical perspective to understand better how stepchildren experienced and communicatively managed the metaphor of being caught in the middle between parents who lived in different households. As other researchers have identified (e.g., Afifi, 2003; Afifi & Schrodt, 2003), the metaphor of being caught in the middle is powerful for stepchildren, and it clearly animated their discourse in the focus groups well before they were asked to discuss this experience directly.

While a main goal was to deepen understanding of stepchildren's perspectives on being caught in the middle in stepfamilies, we believe the unique and central contribution of the present study has been to unfold the *alternative* to being caught in the middle and what this alternative means to stepchildren. From the discourse of these stepchildren, to feel not caught in the middle is to feel *centered* in the family. In the present study, stepchildren's desire to be centered in the family was animated by the dialectic of freedom–constraint embedded within the contradictions of openness–closedness and control–restraint. The stepchildren in the study provided applications for parents co-raising them on how best to interact with one another and with them. The words and perspectives of these stepchildren are important for parents and practitioners working with stepfamilies to hear.

Although the freedom–constraint dialectic shares some commonalities with Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) autonomy–connection dialectic, this contradiction took a different turn as stepchildren reflected on being caught in the middle. In his work on friendship, Rawlins (1983) also described a freedom dialectic in terms of the freedom to be dependent and independent in the formation and enactments of friendships.

However, in the stepfamily context, freedom–constraint is centered within a relationship that is non-voluntary for most children, at least in their younger years. Children in the present study sought to interact with both of their parents in such a way that would put them in what they felt was their rightful place, at the center of the family.

Managing the openness–closedness dialectic is critical for stepchildren, as being caught in the middle between their parents can compromise the parent–child relationship and have negative effects on children's well-being (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Ganong & Coleman, 1994). In the present study, young adult stepchildren articulated strategies for parents to follow in order to manage their interactions in such a way that children would not feel inappropriately caught between their parents.

In our analysis of the openness–closedness dialectic, stepchildren felt caught in the middle between their parents when parents were too open or too closed. When parents limit or close direct lines of communication with one another, their children often find themselves becoming the go-betweens; mediators; and, at times, unwilling counselors. Although the stepchildren in the present study demonstrated a desire for more adult–adult openness and less adult–stepchild openness, a total recalibration of adult–adult communication and adult–stepchild communication would lead to other, and perhaps more difficult, relational problems. Our sense of being centered, for these stepchildren, was that they were informed on issues that they needed to know about and left out of issues that would result in being caught in the middle. When parents negotiated the openness–closedness dialectic successfully, children in stepfamilies felt centered, which they perceived was their rightful place in the family. We believe the effective management of the openness–closedness dialectic between parents and their children is central to building functional stepfamily relationships.

While these stepchildren recognized the constraints they experienced when their parents were unable to communicate effectively, they also recognized the power they gained. Scholars and practitioners need to understand this freedom–constraint dialectic and the structures (the rules and resources) that both enable and constrain interaction in the stepfamily. Dialectical scholars have yet to explore fully the power dialectic. Baxter (in press) argues that stepfamilies are an excellent place to see this power dialectic in play, and the results in the present study provide a starting point for understanding how relational parties manage this contradiction.

While there are contributions in the present study, there are limitations and opportunities for future researchers as well. While we responded to the call to represent the children's perspective better in the stepfamily literature, we do recognize that it is important to take into account the perspectives of all stepfamily members. First, we have obviously featured the perspective of stepchildren, and realize that their parents have their own vantage point. It is important to include the perspective of stepparents as well. Even though the stepchildren were asked to talk about the adults co-raising them in stepfamilies, most of the discussions centered on their parents. We were somewhat surprised by this focus on the parent, given the focus the stepparent has received in the literature. Certainly, researchers have identified the importance of the relationship of the former partners for effective co-parenting in post-divorce families (Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Whiteside, 1998). Understanding how to help foster the best relationship possible between former partners is important, especially since one predictor of children's contact with their nonresidential parent is the quality of the nonresidential parent's relationship with his or her former partner (e.g., Dudley, 1991; Stone & McKenry, 1998). We believe it is important to understand the system of all the adults co-raising children to help create strong stepfamilies. To this end, a subset of our research team is currently analyzing a large data set on interactions between parents, stepparents, stepchildren, and nonresidential parents from the same family.

Second, it is important for researchers to consider the developmental stages of stepchildren. As interpretive researchers, we focused on the similarities across the experiences of these stepchildren; clearly, researchers working with larger data sets and logical empirical methods may wish to look at possible relationships between the child's age and his or her perceptions of being caught and centered. In addition, older children may be better able to appreciate and handle different types of information and different forms of parental communication than younger children.

Applications

Based on these findings and the discussion, we believe it is critical for practitioners working with stepfamilies and parents to understand the implications of children feeling caught in the middle between their parents, in order for them to help parents understand and manage their communication as effectively as possible. Afifi (2003) found that parents were unaware of how much children felt caught in the middle and what the implications were for parents. Thus, we believe that parents would also benefit from the results of this present study, with a focus on this metaphor of being caught in the middle, understanding the contradictions present for children (and exploring their own set of contradictions), and hearing the advice stepchildren and researchers have to offer. If parents could view the drawings from the focus groups and hear the comments from the children, we believe they would find the information instructive, and we suspect most would find the children's experiences moving as well. To that end, we have offered to write an article on our findings for the Stepfamily Association of America's publication for stepfamily members and to present our findings to local chapters of the association.

Teaching parents about these dialectical tensions and the advice that springs from them can be very helpful for these parents. First, in terms of the freedom–constrain dialectic, children clearly want to be able to maintain a relationship with both of their parents. The focus group participants were very clear that they wanted their parents to put children's concerns first, keep adult problems away from the children, and practice civil and open communication with one another. Being centered, rather than caught in the middle, gives stepchildren the freedom to have the kind of relationship they desire with both of their parents. At the same time, being centered invokes constraints that helped the parents enact appropriate and consistent expectations for the children.

Second, regarding the openness–closedness dialectic, it is clear that parents need to understand how to disclose appropriately to children in stepfamilies, taking into account the age of the children and their ability to handle particular kinds of information. Our sense of being centered, for these stepchildren, was that they want to be informed on issues that they believe they needed to know about and left out of issues that would result in them being caught in the middle. Understanding this phenomenon of being caught in the middle is also important as co-parents may underestimate their use of, and the implications for, children as go-betweens. Being used as a go-between often has negative implications for stepchildren, and we advise parents to use this communication channel sparingly, especially if the messages will be potentially uncomfortable or inappropriate for children to hear or transmit.

Third, the control–restraint dialectic represents opportunities for parents to negotiate more clearly the boundaries and discipline for their children. Children were quite aware that being caught in the middle allowed them to get away with things, as they could count on their parents to not communicate effectively with one another. In retrospect, children appreciated their parents cooperating across the households and setting limits for them. In addition, we advise parents not to put children in a position where children believe they have to choose sides. Rather, we advise parents to negotiate in private, especially those issues that would be difficult for children to handle.

The results of the present study indicate that researchers and clinicians need to understand better the implications for stepchildren of being caught in the middle, and also to continue to explore what children want and need from their parents in stepfamilies. We believe that the concept of being centered begins to capture that desire. These findings may be useful for designing interventions, and perhaps role playing activities that can help parents understand the implications of their communication and develop better practices of communication. Researchers and clinicians need to help parents manage these contradictions and communicate in ways that will help create healthy and strong stepfamilies and children.

Notes

1. Clinicians have been using drawings as a therapeutic tool for a number of years (Malchiodi, 1998). As they are not clinicians, the researchers were careful to rely on participants' discourse for interpretations of the meanings associated with the drawings.

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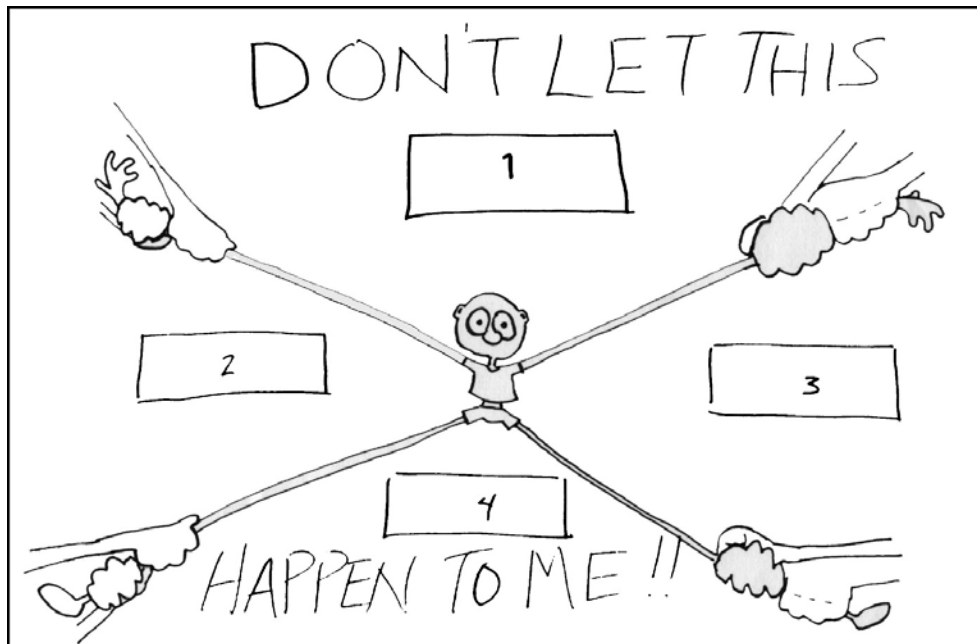**Figure 1.** Child caught in the middle between parents and stepparents.

Figure 2. Child centred, not caught in the middle.