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CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF FAMILY ENVIRONMENT  
IN STEP AND INTACT FAMILIES

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the  
University of North Texas in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

Lisa M. Elliott, B.B.A., M.S.

Denton, Texas

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This purpose of this research study was to identify key differences that distinguish stepfamilies from intact families with regard to individual members' perceptions of family environment and family functioning. Additionally, an initial look at how membership in a stepfamily impacts the young children's perceptions of interpersonal family functioning is offered. Thirty stepfamily and 30 intact family dyads (mother and father) completed a demographic questionnaire and The Family Environment Scale, while each child was administered the Children's Version of The Family Environment Scale.

Results suggested that biological mothers and young children (8-10 years) in a stepfamily do not perceive themselves any differently than mothers and children of intact families in regard to cohesion, expressiveness, and level of conflict. However, stepfathers, when compared to fathers of intact families, report perceiving less cohesion (i.e., commitment, helpfulness, and support). Furthermore, when individual members' perceptions within the stepfamily are compared, stepfathers not only reported less cohesion,

but also less expressiveness. Stepchildren on the other hand, reported perceiving more conflict than either the biological mother or stepfather. Significant gender differences were also found between stepchildren.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES . . . . .	iv
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
Effects on Children	
Psychological Development	
Cognitive/Intellectual Development	
Interpersonal Development	
Remarriage and Stepfamily Adjustment	
Stepfathers	
Stepmothers	
Children	
Statement of Purpose	
II. METHOD . . . . .	23
Subjects	
Instruments	
Procedure	
III. RESULTS . . . . .	32
Sample Characteristics	
Main Hypotheses	
IV. DISCUSSION . . . . .	46
APPENDICES . . . . .	64
REFERENCES . . . . .	74

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Child Sample Characteristics . . . . .	33
2. Stepchildrens' Age at Time of Divorce and Remarriage . . . . .	35
3. Stepfamily Mothers and Intact Family Mothers Multivariate T-Tests Results . . . . .	36
4. Stepfamily Fathers and Intact Family Fathers Multivariate T-Tests Results . . . . .	37
5. Stepfathers and Intact Fathers Multivariate T-Test Results . . . . .	39
6. Stepchildren and Intact Children Multivariate T-Test Results . . . . .	40
7. Stepfamily MANOVA Results . . . . .	42
8. Stepfamily Membership-Gender MANOVA Results . . . . .	44

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Approximately one-half million children become members of stepfamilies each year due to their parent/parents' remarriage and the rate is increasing (Ganong & Coleman, 1984). Glick (1984) estimated that one-third of the children living in the United States today will be part of a stepfamily before reaching adulthood. Awareness and concern about this growing population have only recently become visible as a result of increased media coverage, popular writings, and various educational programs, as well as the development of self-help groups. Mental health professionals, confronted with an onslaught of stepchildren and stepfamilies seeking therapy, have helped to enhance awareness that stepfamilies face unique and separate challenges in family living (Carter & McGoldrick, 1988; Esses & Campbell, 1984).

In the past, it was popularly assumed that parental remarriage had a detrimental effect on children. This assumption, perhaps fueled by portrayals of wicked stepmothers and abusive stepparents in fairy tales, held that stepchildren would likely exhibit mental, emotional, and interpersonal problems. One indication of this



perspective is that "stepchild" has become a metaphor for something abused, neglected, and unloved; "stepparent" (especially "stepmother") has become a negative term laden with stereotypes (e.g., stepmothers are wicked and mean) (Coleman & Ganong, 1987). This negative image is so pervasive that one definition of the word stepchild is "one that fails to receive proper care or attention" (Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, 1976). Wald (1981) stated that the term "step-" encapsulates four basic aspects of the human experience of the steprelationship: bereavement, replacement, negative connotations, and lack of institutionalization of this family form in the constellation of families. She suggested that the continued use of the prefix "step-" in a negative context, as well as the use of the term "stepchild" as a metaphor for neglect or abuse helps promote a negative bias against stepfamilies. Consequently, stepfamily members, writers, and therapists have sought and developed terms to describe themselves/group in nonjudgmental ways (Wald, 1981). Many euphemisms have been developed such as, blended, reconstituted, remarried, Rem, extended, second, merged, combined, and reorganized. Some family members prefer to avoid the prefix "step-" altogether referring to each other as "mother", "mother by marriage", etc.

Popular assumptions and stereotypes aside, the question still remains: what is the effect of parental remarriage on

children? Is it always unfavorable? Despite increasing numbers of stepfamilies, the majority of recent literature has been initiated by therapists and counselors. Empirical research which focuses on stepparent-stepchild relationships and child development is rare. Research on family responses to divorce has proliferated in recent years; however, divorce has been treated as a terminal rather than transitional event. There is minimal information regarding the sociodemographic characteristics of stepfamilies, the structural and functional differences among types of stepfamilies, the processes involved in establishing an effective stepfamily, and the kinds of interventions that facilitate effective stepfamily functioning. Research investigating stepfamilies dates back to 1956 when Bernard conducted a pioneering study intended to identify factors influencing remarried couple success by interviewing acquaintances of stepfamilies. By 1979, the number of empirical investigations was still small and research that has been conducted to date is at a relatively primitive stage in its development and is fraught with methodological problems. Consequently, stepparenting as a role transition, whether it is from a child, parental, or familial perspective is worthy of empirical research and understanding.

This paper reviewed the literature currently available on stepparenting; the effects on children and family adjustment research.

#### Effects on Children

Available literature regarding the effects on children can typically be classified into three general areas: psychological development (self-concept, mental health, & personality characteristics), cognitive/intellectual development, and interpersonal development (family & other social relationships).

#### Psychological Development

Research on the self-concept of stepchildren is conflicting. Most studies report no differences in self-concept between stepchildren and children in intact or single parent families (Johnson & Hutchinson, 1989; Parish & Nunn, 1981; Parish & Parish, 1983; Raschke & Raschke, 1979; Santrock, Warshak, Lindberg & Meadows, 1982). The most recent of these studies, Johnson and Hutchinson (1989), examined the effects of family structure (intact, stepparent, and single parent) on children's self-concepts utilizing the Parish and Parish Personal Attribute Inventory for Children (1978). One hundred ninety-nine subjects from grades seven to twelve were asked to identify 15 adjectives that best described themselves. Although not statistically significant, differences were established in how children in these three family structures perceived themselves; subjects

from stepfamilies tended to check fewer positive adjectives than those from intact families.

Two studies, however, did report lower self-images in stepchildren, Rosenberg (1965) and Kaplan and Pokorny (1971). Rosenberg examined the effects of family structure and cause of parental loss (death or divorce) with self-esteem and psychosomatic complaints. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965) was administered to 5,024 eleventh and twelfth grade students. Although stepchildren had lower self-esteem and more psychosomatic complaints, no statistical analysis was reported.

The study by Kaplan and Pokorny (1971) is unique in that it is one of the few studies that examined adults from childhood broken homes as well as the effects of family structure, cause of parental loss, age at time of parental remarriage, sex, race, and SES with self-esteem. Though finding few differences in self-esteem between stepchildren and those from intact families, Kaplan and Pokorny did find that if parental remarriage occurred after the subject was eight years of age, self-image was lower. However, findings are likely serendipitous due to the statistical procedure utilized: the calculation of 190 chi-square tests.

With regard to mental health functioning, two studies utilized self-reports of psychosomatic complaints (Burchinal, 1964; Rosenberg, 1965). Burchinal examined one's proclivity for illness, nervousness, anxiety, fright

reactions, school social relations, number of days absent from classes, number of school activities and friends, and whether the subject liked or disliked school and teachers with family structure, sex, and SES. Unlike some of the other studies, Burchinal not only relied on a self-report questionnaire but also administered the Minnesota Test of Personality (Darley & McNamara, 1941). The sample included 1,566 seventh and eleventh graders from one community. No differences were found with regard to personality, characteristics, grades, school and community activities, number of friends, school attitudes or days absent.

Dahl, McCubbin, and Lester (1976), conducted a comparison of three groups of military families: reunited (fathers returned from Vietnam), nonreunited (fathers did not return from Vietnam), and reconstituted (fathers did not return and mothers remarried). The reunited and nonreunited children were matched with reconstituted children from nine families on sex, father's rank, duration of father's absence, birth order, and developmental stage of family life cycle. Method included interviewing the children and administering the California Personality Inventory (Gough, 1956). Each group consisted of ten boys and four girls with a mean age of 11 years. Results indicated that the reconstituted family children had significantly more withdrawal tendencies and nervous symptoms than reunited children and were generally less adjusted than either of the

other two groups. Dahl et al. (1976) suggested that adding a stepfather may actually create new stress. There are two factors however, that should be considered in evaluating the significance of these results. First, data were collected during the first year of parental remarriage and secondly, much of this information needs to be interpreted in light of war trauma.

In a more recent study, Lutz (1983) investigated stepfamily stress, namely adolescent stepchildren's perceptions of stressful and nonstressful aspects of family living. This investigation is unique in that it is one of the few studies that examined such factors as the residence of the stepchild, the stepchild's birth order, and the number of step and half siblings. Stepchildren, ages 12 to 18 years, responded to a questionnaire that listed a series of 11 stressors as identified in clinical literature on stepfamilies. Only two of the 11 stressors, divided loyalty and discipline, were seen as more often stressful than not. However, it is important to note that these stressors may also be overstated due to the scoring method used. Stressor items that subjects indicated as "does not apply" were not computed in the perceived stress score. If these stressors that "do not apply" were considered, the magnitude of the stress perceived by these stepchildren was quite low. Despite these overstated estimates, Lutz concluded that this

group of stepchildren reported less stress than suggested by the clinical literature.

Only three studies investigating personality attributes were identified. A previously mentioned study, Burchinal (1964) found no differences in children of different family structures on measurements of mood fluctuations, envy and withdrawal reactions, excessive intraspection, oversensitivity to others, and obsessive feelings. Bernard's (1956) pioneering study of stepchildren compared 59 college-aged stepchildren to standardized norms on the Bernreuter Personality Inventory (Bernreuter, 1954). Although there were no statistically significant differences between stepchildren and children from intact families, stepchildren were found to be more stable, less self-sufficient, and equal regarding dominance and submissiveness with respect to parents.

The final personality investigation was conducted by Parish (1982). This study investigated the effects of family structure, cause of family dissolution and sex on college students' locus of control orientation. Parish administered the Rotter Internal/External Locus of Control (Rotter, 1966) questionnaire to 711 college students. Results suggested that males from stepfather families due to divorce were more externally controlled than males from intact families, non-remarried families where the father died, and all females regardless of family structure.

Parish did not provide the number of subjects who had stepfathers; thus, inferences from Parish's study must be made with caution, especially if that particular cell was small. Despite some conflicting evidence, most children in stepfamilies generally do not appear to differ significantly in self-image or other psychological variables such as psychosomatic symptoms or personality characteristics.

#### Cognitive/Intellectual Development

In comparison to psychological and interpersonal development, few studies have examined the intellectual development of stepchildren. Bohannon and Yahraes (1979), Burchinal (1964), and Santrock (1972) compared school records and grades and found that no differences existed. Both the Burchinal and Santrock studies utilized nonprobability, archival data. Bohannon et al. randomly sampled 14 year olds in San Diego and subjects were stratified for income, ethnicity, and neighborhood. School records were reviewed and interviews were conducted.

Chapman (1977) examined family structure (intact, stepfamily, & single-parent) with scholastic aptitude (SAT scores) and field independence (Embedded Figures Test) with college students. He found that stepdaughters were significantly more field independent than females in single parent families and they scored slightly higher on the SAT verbal than females from either single parent or intact families. Males from intact families on the other hand,



were found to be slightly more field independent and had significantly higher verbal and overall SAT scores than single parent families, with stepsons falling in between. Chapman concluded that the presence of a father or stepfather enhances field independence and higher SAT scores than children from father-absent environments.

In a recent study however, differences were noted to exist among children from stepfamilies. Featherstone, Cundick, and Jensen (1992) evaluated differences in school behavior and achievement between students from intact, reconstituted, and single-parent families. They found children from intact two-parent families had fewer absences and tardies, higher grade point averages, and fewer negative and more positive teacher behavioral ratings than did those children from stepfamilies and single-parent families. Although most studies found that stepchildren do not appear to be different from children in other family structures on cognitive or intellectual achievement, more recent research suggests this possibility.

#### Interpersonal Development

Interpersonal family relations is one area that has received considerable attention in the literature on adjustment. The majority of studies found that family relationships in stepfamilies do not differ from those in other families; no differences were found in relationships with fathers (Bohannon & Yahraes, 1979), perceptions of

amount of parental happiness (Raschke & Raschke, 1979), perceptions of the amount of family conflict (Raschke & Raschke, 1979), and positive family relationships (Wilson, Zurcher, McAdams, & Curtis, 1975). Most stepchildren reported liking stepparents and getting along well with them (Bernard, 1956; Duberman, 1973; Palermo, 1980). Although these studies have examined outcomes, methodologically adequate studies of stepparent-stepchild relationships are virtually nonexistent with one exception, Santrock, Warshak, Lindbergh, and Meadows (1982). This study is unique in that it was based on behavioral observation. The authors compared parent-child and stepparent-stepchild interactions using trained observer evaluations of videotaped interaction tasks in stepfather, intact, and single-mother families. Parental behaviors measured included control, encouragement of independence, meaningful verbal interaction, attentiveness, maturity, and authoritarianism. Child behaviors measured included warmth, self-esteem, anxiety, demandingness, maturity, independence, and social ability. There were no statistically significant differences in interpersonal behavior between these family structures. However, males displayed more warmth than females towards their stepfathers and females were more anxious in stepfather families than in intact families.

A few studies have found that stepparent-stepchild relationships are more negative than parent-child

relationships (Bowerman & Irish, 1962; Clingempeel, Brand, & Ievoli, 1984; Halperin & Smith, 1983). In an attempt to fill the gap of methodologically inadequate studies resulting from lack of multi-method, multi-source, and multi-measure assessment, Clingempeel et al. (1984) examined 9-12 year old children from 16 stepmother and 16 stepfather families, with equal numbers of each sex. Measures included the Child Report of Stepparent Behavior Inventory-Love and Detachment dimensions (Schaefer, 1965), Parent and Stepparent Report of Child Behavior Toward the Stepparent Inventory (Schaefer, Edgerton, & Finkelstein, 1979) and Behavioral Observations: Family Problem Solving System (Forgatch & Wieder, 1981). The major finding in this research was that the stepparent-stepdaughter relationships in both stepmother and stepfather families were more problematic than stepparent-stepson relationships. Females emitted less positive verbal and more negative problem-solving behavior towards their stepparents than did males. Stepparents did not differ in their responses to males and females.

The Bowerman and Irish (1962) study has become a classic in stepfamily research and is one of the most frequently cited in family textbooks, even though the findings run counter to the majority of the studies on stepparent-stepchild relationships (Ganong, Coleman, & Brown, 1981). Bowerman and Irish (1962) conducted a large

scale survey of 29,000 seventh through twelfth grade students. They concluded: a) affection was higher for biological parents than stepparents, b) difference in closeness was highest in stepfather families, c) stepchildren were more likely to express a preference for one parent over the other than were children from intact families, d) preference was more often for biological parents in stepfamilies, e) stepparents were believed to discriminate more often than biological parents, f) stepchildren felt more parental rejection, g) children in stepfamilies more often wished to emulate biological parents more than stepparents, and h) stepmothers had more difficult relationships with stepchildren than stepfathers. One point that is important to keep in mind with regard to this study, is the large developmental factor that comes into play when evaluating such a wide age span, seventh through twelfth grade.

In an effort to examine the current validity of the Bowerman and Irish (1962) study, Ganong and Coleman (1984) assessed the attitudes of adolescent stepchildren using Bowerman's and Irish's questions. They found: a) there are few differences in how stepsons and stepdaughters perceive their relationship to their stepparents, b) the stepdaughter-stepfather relationship appears to be less emotionally close than other stepparent-child dyads, c) stepchildren do not feel more distant from stepmothers than

stepfathers, d) in general, stepchildren perceive themselves to be at least moderately close to their stepparents, e) length of time residing in a stepfamily household and cause of dissolution of previous family do not affect stepparent-child closeness. The differences from these two studies suggest that researchers, clinicians, and the public should be cautious in accepting results from any study to be "...timeless because much social data may be time-bound in a particular social-historical context" (Ganong & Coleman, 1984. pg. 15). Consequently, researchers, writers, and textbook authors should not rely solely upon information from studies conducted a decade or more ago.

#### Remarriage and Stepfamily Adjustment

Existing research has produced conflicting accounts of the quality of relations and the general level of harmony within stepfamily environments (Furstenberg, 1987). Clinicians have uncovered a great deal more evidence of strain than have investigators employing survey methods on nonclinical samples (Esses & Campbell, 1984). Clinicians, on the other hand, have searched with more probing tools, usually directed towards client populations consisting of families who are in the process of negotiating the transition to stepfamily life. It is not surprising that these clinicians have discovered more distress than researchers who have examined more general indications of family functioning in larger and less-select populations (Furstenberg, 1987).

### Stepfathers

More than one-half of the stepfamilies formed after divorce include stepfathers (Rallings, 1976). Stepfathers tend to be either inattentive and disengaged, giving the mother little childrearing support, or very actively involved, often with a tendency to be restrictive, especially towards sons. But if the stepfather is able to set consistent limits and communicate warmly and well with the children, and if the mother welcomes his support, the stepchildren, especially boys, generally function better than do children in single-parent families or conflicted, nondivorce families (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Robinson, 1984).

The presence of stepfathers in homes in which the natural parents divorced before the child reached five years of age had a positive effect on six- to 11-year-old boys (Santrock, 1972). Oshman and Manosevitz (1976) also found that stepfathers had positive effects on stepsons. Children age nine to 15, however, are less likely to accept a good stepparent than are younger or older children (Hetherington et al., 1982). Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found that younger children, particularly girls, were more accepting of stepfathers. Older children and adolescents felt resentment with a stepfather present. Most children compared the new stepfather with the natural father. In most cases the stepfather did not replace the natural father, except when

children and fathers rejected each other. Stern (1978) suggested that stepfathers were likely to be more successful disciplinarians when they adopted a slow gentle, flexible approach and developed a friendship to foster the child's participation, instead of trying to control the child through authoritarian means.

Some stepfathers whose biological children lived with their mothers felt pain and regretted the time spent with stepchildren when they could spend so little time with their own (Brooks, 1981; Visher & Visher, 1979). Duberman (1973) found that prior marital status of the stepfather predicted how well the stepfather got along with the children. If the stepfather was divorced, 54% had excellent relationships; and if never married, 85% of the stepfather-stepchildren relationships were excellent. There is also evidence suggesting that stepfathers have better relationships with stepchildren (Duberman, 1973) and adjust easier to the stepparenting role (Bowerman & Irish, 1962) than do stepmothers.

### Stepmothers

Numerous investigators have indicated that stepmothers have more trouble with adjustment to remarriage than do stepfathers (Kosinski, 1983). Duberman (1973) noted that the age of the child made a difference (as it did for stepfathers) and that the adjustment was easier if the child was under 13. Duberman (1973) also found that younger

stepmothers had better relationships with stepchildren than did older stepmothers. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found, however, that younger stepmothers had more difficulty, especially with teenage girls. Jones (1978) noted that the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship was the most difficult.

As with stepfathers, prior marital status of the stepmother was a predictor of relationship quality. If the stepmother was previously divorced, 63% had an excellent relationship with stepchildren; if widowed, 76% had an excellent relationship; if never married, only 55% had excellent relationships. For stepmothers, being widowed was the best predictor. Interestingly, stepfathers who were never married had the highest percentage of excellent relationships with stepchildren.

Duberman (1973) also found that a stepmother's feelings for her stepchildren were influenced by whether her own children resided with her. If they did, 67% had excellent relationships with stepchildren. If however, these stepmothers' children resided elsewhere, only 44% had excellent relationships with stepchildren.

Draughon (1975) identified three models that a stepmother can use in the new family: 1) primary mother; 2) other mother; 3) friend. Draughon felt that the primary mother role could only be used if the biological mother had abandoned the children and mourning was complete. If there was a strong bond between biological mother and the



children, the friend could be the most useful model for a stepmother to follow.

### Children

Although there has been a recent proliferation of research focusing on the effects on children of stepfamilies, there is little research that addresses children's adjustment to stepfamily environments and harmony in stepfamilies. In the majority of available studies, researchers attempted to ascertain differences in adjustment if a child experienced the death of a parent versus the divorce of his or her parents. Langer and Micheal (1963) found that children living in a remarriage were less well-adjusted than either children living in a family that had experienced bereavement or children living in a family of divorce without remarriage. A study by Walker et al. (1979) confirmed this finding. Other studies have examined the quality of stepparent-stepchild relationships as a function of whether the previous marriage had ended in divorce or death. Children who lose a parent by death and children who lose a parent by desertion or divorce are affected in different ways (Duberman, 1973; Furman, 1974). Children who lose a parent by death are ready to accept a new parent before the parent is ready to remarry, especially if the child is young. Children who never knew or could not remember the lost parent questioned whether they were lovable (Furman, 1974). Furman (1974) found children of

divorced parents had more difficulty accepting the loss of a parent, and were disappointed when the fantasy of parental reconciliation was not realized. In addition, these children appeared to be more frustrated and angry than those who lost a parent by death. Children whose identification with the absent parent is very strong, who cling to a fantasy of reuniting with the absent parent, or who have greater anxiety about being abandoned by the remaining parent are especially likely to have difficulties when parents remarry (Tessman, 1978). Duberman's (1973) research concurred with this statement. He found that families were more likely to have good stepparent-stepchild relationships when the previous marriage ended in death as opposed to divorce. An additional problem is that most all of the literature in this area focuses on adolescent stepchildren, with little representation of younger children. Available literature suggests that adolescents experience the greatest difficulty in adjusting to the stepfamily system (Capaldi & McRae, 1979; Hodges, 1986; Rosenbaum & Rosenbaum, 1977; Walker, Rogers, & Messinger, 1977). The older the child, the more resistant the child is to the remarriage. Visher and Visher (1979) have suggested a variety of reasons for this difficulty. First, there is often a loss of status with the remarriage because the adolescent loses responsibilities and freedoms. Second, the stepfamily is asking the adolescent to bond at just the point in their

lives they are trying to separate. This request is opposite to the adolescent's developmental needs of autonomy. Third, the sexuality of remarriage and potential problems of mutual attraction is more potent for adolescents. Often hostility serves as a defense against unacceptable feelings. Fourth, adolescent children experience feelings of divided loyalty--if they, like their stepparent, are being disloyal to their natural parent. The stepmother's role with adolescents may be particularly difficult (Walker, Rogers, & Messinger, 1977). She is more likely to spend time with the teenagers and face more disciplinary problems than with younger children.

Finally, there are even fewer studies which have examined the quality of stepparent-stepchild relationships from a child's perspective. Furstenberg (1987) noted huge disparities in children's feelings toward step and biological parents. Parents and their non-biological children alike reported less intimacy. Children were less likely to report doing things with stepparents, much less feel close to them, and most did not want to be like their stepparents when they grew up. In addition, Furstenberg (1987), found that relations between children and stepmothers were more stressful than relations between children and stepfathers. He noted that 44% of the children surveyed said they felt "very close" to their stepmothers as compared to 56% of children reporting about their stepfathers. Similarly, 34% of the children said they

wanted to be "very much" like their stepmother when they grew up, whereas 44% of the children with stepfathers gave a similar response. Dahl, Cowgill and Asmundsson (1987) confirmed Furstenberg's findings. They found daughters had a more difficult time accepting the remarriage of their father than of their mother, whether the father had custody of the daughter or not. Girls were also more likely to express overt anger toward stepmothers, whether the stepmothers were present only on weekends or full-time.

Although there is some agreement that children in stepfamilies experience problems such as increased distress, lack of intimacy, and familial interpersonal problems, there is limited information and lack of consensus regarding the relationship between stepchildren and family functioning. In addition, the literature lacks the younger child's perceptions of his or her family environment. In order to gain a more complete understanding of the impact of stepfamily life on children, it would seem important to assess how these children view their families, how their perceptions match their parents' perceptions, and how they compare to the perceptions of children from intact families.

#### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to expand the research on the effects of stepfamilies on younger children. Of particular interest, was the impact on family functioning as the child perceived his or her own interpersonal family

environment. In addition, this study sought to document differences, if any, between the children's perceptions of their environment and their parents' perceptions. Finally, this study sought to provide further information regarding differences between this group of step family members and members from intact families.

#### Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1. Parents of stepchildren would have more negative perceptions of their family environments than parents of intact families.

Hypothesis 2. Stepchildren would have more negative perceptions of their family environment than children from intact families.

Hypothesis 3. There would be a significant difference between the perceptions of family environment of stepchildren and their parents.

Hypothesis 4. There would be a significant difference between male and female stepchildren and their perceptions of family functioning.

## CHAPTER II

### METHOD

#### Subjects

Thirty children and their reconstituted parents (i.e., one biological parent and one stepparent) and 30 children and their two biological parents from intact families were recruited for the study. If a family had more than one child who was eligible to participate in the study, only the youngest child was evaluated. Participants were recruited from nonclinical populations such as stepfamily resource supports, churches, elementary schools, and referrals from pediatricians who serve these children and families. All children were assumed to be free of any emotional and/or behavioral handicapping condition based on classroom placement (i.e., regular education classes). The children were between the ages of 8 and 10 years. This age population was selected for two reasons. First, there have been no studies of children's perceptions of family environment below the age of 11 years. Second, the only instrument available for assessing younger children's perceptions has not been normed or evaluated for reliability and validity below the third grade level (generally eight years of age).

### Instruments

Subjects' parents were provided a brief description of the purpose of the study (see Appendix A) and a parent/child consent form (see Appendix B). In addition, questionnaires eliciting demographic information about each child and his or her parent were administered (see Appendix C). Items included on this form were relevant to stepfamily research and children's adjustment. These factors included sex, age, and ethnic background of subject. In addition, factors such as residence of the child, child's age at time of biological parents' divorce or death, marital status of biological parents, child's age at time of remarriage, and the number of stepsiblings or half siblings were included.

The Family Environment Scale (FES) (Moos & Moos, 1986) was used to assess parental perceptions of family environment. This measure is a 90-item self-report scale with a true-false format. It is used to evaluate the social environment of the family unit. It contains 10 subscales which assess three major dimensions: Interpersonal Relationships, Personal Growth, and System Maintenance. For the purpose of this study, only the Interpersonal Relationship dimension was utilized. This dimension is composed of three subscales: Cohesion, Expressiveness, and Conflict among family members. The Cohesion subscale assesses the degree of commitment, helpfulness, and support among family members. The Expressiveness subscale evaluates

the degree to which family members are encouraged to express feelings and behave in an open manner. The Conflict subscale evaluates the amount of anger, conflict, and aggression family members express openly among each other. Three forms of the scale are available: Real Form, Ideal Form, and Expectations Form. For this study, the Real Form, which evaluates current family environment, was used. This instrument can be completed by family members aged 11 to adult.

Normative data on the Form R subscales were collected for 1,125 nondistressed families and 500 distressed families. The nondistressed sample represented families from different geographic regions, various ages, generations, ethnic minorities, and family structures. The distressed sample was obtained from a psychiatric-oriented family clinic and a correctional facility. Other families included in this group had members who were psychiatric patients, alcohol abusers, and children or adolescents in crisis. One limitation to the FES, is that normative data is based on average scores of all family members in the sample, thus limiting their usefulness when comparing individual family members' scores. Additionally, the authors did not break down all of the subgroups represented in the normative data, thus comparisons of families to the norms may be not be entirely accurate (Busch-Rossnagel, 1985; Lambert, 1985).



Overall, the FES exhibits good internal psychometric properties (Busch-Rossnagel, 1985; Carlson, 1990; Lambert, 1985). The instrument has good test-retest reliability coefficients which ranged from .68 to .86 after an eight-week period. Internal consistency reliability tests yielded coefficients of .61 to .78 on the various subscales. Caldwell (1988) found the FES to be relatively stable over time with stability coefficients ranging from .52 to .91 after four and 12 month periods.

In addition, this form has adequate face and content validity and research based comparative data (Caldwell, 1985; Carlson, 1990; Moos & Moos, 1986). With respect to construct validity, the FES Cohesion subscale is positively related to measures of dyadic and marital adjustment as well as support from other family members. FES Conflict subscale is positively associated with family arguments, and FES Organization and Control subscales are linked to reliance on predictable and regular family routines. The FES dimensions tend to be predictably related to external criteria in both concurrent and predictive studies. For example, aspects of the family environment, as measured by the FES subscales are associated with adaptation to pregnancy and parenthood, childhood and adolescent adjustment to parental divorce, adaptation to chronic childhood illness and other life stressors, children's cognitive and social development, adjustment among families of psychiatric and medical

patients, and the outcome of treatment for alcoholism, depression, and other psychiatric and medical disorders.

The Children's Version of the Family Environment Scale (CVFES) (Pino, Simons, & Slawinowski, 1984) was used to assess the children's perceptions of their family environment. The CVFES was designed as a downward extension of the FES, for use in conjunction with the FES scales. This measure is a 30-item scale with a pictorial, multiple choice format. It is used to evaluate the perceptions of family social environment in children between the ages of 5 to 12 years. Each CVFES test item is presented with three cartoon-like pictures, in which the child is instructed to select the one picture that looks most like his or her family most of the time. A family consisting of a mother, father, daughter, and son is depicted in each picture. Children are instructed to pretend that the pictures represent their family, even if their family composition is different from the one depicted in the test item pictures.

The CVFES contains the same dimensions and subscales of the FES. The Cohesion subscale is used to evaluate the extent to which family members are concerned and committed to the family and the degree to which family members are helpful and supportive of each other. The Expressiveness subscale is used to measure how much family members are allowed and encouraged to act openly and to express their feelings directly. The Conflict subscale is used to

evaluate the amount of openly expressed anger and aggression, as well as conflictual interactions among family members. The Real Form, which is used to evaluate perceptions of current family environment, was utilized for this study.

Busch-Rossnagel (1989) noted some limitations with the administration of the CVFES. Although the CVFES is a pictorial test, subjects are required to have a third grade reading level due to written captions included on some test items. Thus, subjects who cannot read would require individual administration. In addition, Busch-Rossnagel (1989) noted that some CVFES items depicted unclear facial expressions on family members. She suggested that this introduced potential visual perception difficulties for children. To help facilitate understanding of pictorial items, the CVFES format was modified for this particular study by including written descriptions for items that did not already contain written captions.

A weakness of this scale is the limited data presently available on the psychometric properties of this measure (Busch-Rossnagel, 1989; Carlson, 1990; Pino et al., 1984). Normative data on the Form R subscales were collected for 158 Buffalo, New York area children in grades one through six. Children were mainly drawn from lower and middle socioeconomic groups. While there was an equal number of male and female subjects representing a number of

different nationalities, the religious grouping was largely Roman Catholic. The instrument was found to have high reliability over a four week test-retest interval, yielding a coefficient of .80.

Only one study has been done to establish content validity. Two grades of the original normative group were selected at random to write out the "common meaning" of each set of pictures. Two scorers, with an inter-rater reliability of .84, then scored each scale on whether each subjects' response matched the FES scale dimension. Z values were calculated in order to determine how well raters agreed with the children's analysis of each CVFES scale. All ten subscales were shown to be correctly identified for both grade levels with Z values ranging from -3.03 to -7.2 with a probability factor of  $< .01$ .

Although there are limitations to the CVFES, in particular, limited normative data, the CVFES was utilized in this study because it is the only instrument presently available to evaluate the family environment from the younger child's perspective. The measure's limited norms and validity data make comparisons between the FES and CVFES scores experimental in nature.

The Hollingshead Four Factor Index of Social Status (Hollingshead, 1975) was used as a demographic index of social status for subjects participating in this study. This index provides an estimate of the socioeconomic (SES)

of both married and unmarried individuals of both genders. It is frequently employed as an SES index for families. Four factors are utilized to determine social status: education, occupation, marital status, and gender.

Individuals' occupations are assigned a score based on a nine-point scale. Occupational categories are based on 450 occupational titles and codes of the 1970 United States Census (Hollingshead, 1975). The educational factor is a seven-point scale, based on number of years of education an individual has completed. A composite score is obtained by multiplying the occupational and educational factors by factor weights.

Gottfried (1985) examined the properties of various measures of socioeconomic status and concluded that this measure was reliable and valid. He recommended its use in developmental research because it allows for the evaluation of socioeconomic status (SES) in single parent families as well as in two-parent families.

#### Procedure

All children and their parents participated voluntarily. Parents were asked to sign a consent form for their children and themselves (see Appendix B). Subjects were told that the purpose of the study was to gain information regarding young children's perceptions of family environments and whether these differed for children from intact family or stepfamily structures. In addition, each

participant was informed that all identifying information was confidential and that responses were to be recorded in a manner that would not identify them. Parents were informed that they would need to complete a demographic questionnaire and one self-report measure about themselves, their children, and their families. Parents were notified of the necessary time requirement, approximately 45 minutes. Child consent was obtained from each child by asking him or her to sign the consent form as well (see Appendix B). Each child was individually administered one self-report measure, taking approximately 20 minutes. Debriefing was available at conclusion of the testing session.

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

#### Sample Characteristics

A total of 60 children, 30 from intact families and 30 from stepfamilies, participated in this study. Sample characteristics are presented in Table 1. There were 32 female and 28 male children of which 22 (38%) were eight years of age, 15 (25%) were nine years of age, and 22 (37%) were 10 years of age. There was an equal representation for school grade levels, 50% third grade and 50% fourth grade. Subjects in both groups, intact families and stepfamilies, were predominately caucasian (83% and 100% respectively). Study participants were a relatively advantaged group in terms of education and socioeconomic status. The majority of both parents, regardless of family structure (i.e., intact family or stepfamily) had earned a college degree or higher. Over 50% ( $N = 33$ ) of the participants worked in professional or technical positions, with another 35% ( $N = 21$ ) worked in some type of skilled craft, clerical or sales position. The average number of years married for stepfamilies was 3.7 years, and 14.5 years for the intact families.

Table 1  
Child Sample Characteristics

Variable	Group One		Group Two	
	<u>Stepfamilies</u>		<u>Intact Families</u>	
	<u>N = 30</u>		<u>N = 30</u>	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
<b>Child's Age</b>				
8 Years	7	23.3	16	53.3
9 Years	9	30.0	6	20.0
10 Years	14	46.7	8	26.7
<b>Child's Grade</b>				
3rd Grade	11	36.7	19	63.3
4th Grade	19	63.3	11	36.7
<b>Child's Sex</b>				
Male	13	43.3	15	50.0
Female	17	56.7	15	50.0
<b>Child's Race</b>				
African Am.	-	-	1	3.3
Native Am.	-	-	1	3.3
Caucasian	30	100.0	25	83.3
Mexican Am.	-	-	3	10.0
Asian Am.	-	-	-	-

(Table continues)



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Variable	Group One		Group Two	
	<u>Stepfamilies</u>		<u>Intact Families</u>	
	<u>N</u> = 30		<u>N</u> = 30	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
<hr/>				
Child's Residence				
Biological Parents	-	-	30	50.0
Mother/Stepfather	22	36.7	-	-
Father/Stepmother	3	5.0	-	-
*Other	5	8.3	-	-

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\*Respondents who reported "Other" for residence, indicated the child lived full-time with their other biological parent.

Sample characteristics specific to stepchildren include age at time of parents' divorce, as well as age at parental remarriage. The average age of divorce for those stepchildren participating in this study was 3.2 years ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 2.34$ ). Average age at time of remarriage for these children was 5.8 years ( $M = 5.86$ ,  $SD = 2.50$ ). Additional breakdown by ages are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Stepchildrens' Age at Time of Divorce and Remarriage

Child's Age	Divorce		Remarriage	
	<u>N</u> = 30		<u>N</u> = 30	
	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
One Year	7	23.3	1	3.3
Two years	8	26.7	1	3.3
Three Years	7	23.3	4	13.3
Four Years	1	3.3	5	16.7
Five Years	2	6.7	1	3.3
Six Years	2	6.7	6	20.0
Seven Years	-	-	5	16.7
Eight Years	1	3.3	1	3.3
Nine Years	2	6.7	3	10.0
Ten Years	-	-	3	10.0

Main Hypotheses

The first hypothesis predicted that parents of stepchildren (or a blended family) would have more negative perceptions of their family environments than parents of intact families. Two multivariate t-tests were performed, one for mothers/stepmothers and one for fathers/stepfathers, using parental status (stepfamily versus intact family) as

the independent variable. The dependent variables were the three dimensions of the Family Environment Scale: Cohesion, Expressiveness, and Conflict. Results are presented in Tables 3 and 4. There was not a main effect for mothers but, there was a significant main effect for fathers/stepfathers (Hotelling T Square = 10.151,  $F(3, 56) = 3.27$ ,  $p < .0279$ ). Univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed on each dependent variable and revealed that parental status was related to scores on the Cohesion dimension only ( $F(1, 58) = 3.11$ ,  $p < .003$ ). Fathers within stepfamilies reported less cohesion ( $M = 5.47$ ) than fathers from intact families ( $M = 7.33$ ).

Table 3

Stepfamily Mothers and Intact Family Mothers  
Multivariate T-Test Results

Variable	Group One		Group Two		F	Group
	Step-Mothers		Intact-Mothers			
	N = 30		N = 30			
Comparisons	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>		
Cohesion	6.63	2.17	7.33	1.77	.176	1=2
Expressiveness	5.90	1.75	6.13	1.63	.595	1=2
Conflict	3.20	2.46	3.23	1.89	.953	1=2

$p < .05$

Table 4

Stepfamily Father and Intact Family FathersMultivariate T-Tests Results

Variable	Group One		Group Two		F	Group
	Step-Fathers		Intact-Fathers			
	<u>N = 30</u>		<u>N = 30</u>			
Comparisons	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>		
Cohesion	5.47	2.69	7.33	1.89	.003*	1>2
Expressiveness	5.00	1.55	5.27	2.15	.584	1=2
Conflict	3.93	2.48	2.97	2.26	.118	1=2

\*p &lt; .05

In summary, the data suggests that only fathers from stepfamilies perceive their environment more negatively, and only with regard to the degree of commitment and support provided among family members. Although the data does not appear to support this hypothesis for mothers in a stepfamily, review of the stepchildrens' full-time residence and composition of these sample stepfamilies may help to provide some explanation. Analysis of the sample indicates that 22 of the 30 stepfamily subjects have a family composition of mother, stepfather, and stepchild. Three families represent the father, stepmother, and stepchild

family structure. The remaining five stepfamilies indicated that their stepchild resides with the other parent on a full-time basis. Thus, of those stepfamilies responding, the majority consist of biological mothers and stepfathers. There is little representation of stepmothers.

Given that the stepfamily sample is so skewed in the direction of mother/stepfather compositions, an additional multivariate t-test was performed using only the 30 fathers from intact families and the 22 full-time stepfathers. Results are presented in Table 5. This analysis yielded a significant main effect (Hotelling T Square = 11.666,  $F(3, 48) = 3.73$ ,  $p < .0172$ ). Univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed for all three dependent variables, again, revealing that parental status (father/stepfather) was related to scores on the Cohesion dimension only ( $F(1, 50) = 3.36$ ,  $p < .002$ ). Stepfathers reported less cohesion ( $M = 5.18$ ) than fathers from intact families ( $M = 7.33$ ). Thus, the data does appear to partially support the hypothesis that stepparents, at least stepfathers will perceive their family environments more negatively.

The second hypothesis predicted that stepchildren will have more negative perceptions of their family environments than children from intact families. A multivariate t-test was performed using child status (stepfamily versus intact family) as the independent variable and the three dimensions (i.e., Cohesion, Expressiveness, and Conflict) of the

Table 5

Stepfathers and Intact Fathers Multivariate T-Test Results

Variable	Group One		Group Two		F	Group
	Step-Fathers		Intact-Fathers			
	<u>N = 22</u>		<u>N = 30</u>			
Comparisons	M	SD	M	SD		
Cohesion	5.18	2.72	7.33	1.89	.002*	1>2
Expressiveness	4.82	1.95	5.27	2.15	.413	1=2
Conflict	4.59	2.48	2.97	2.26	.017	1=2

\*p < .05

Children's Version of the Family Environment Scale as the dependent variables. There was no significant main effect, suggesting that there are no differences among children of stepfamilies and children of intact families with regard to how they perceive their family environment on these three dimensions, thus the hypothesis was not supported. Results presented in Table 6.

The third hypothesis predicted a significant difference between the perceptions of family environment of stepchildren and their parents (one biological parent and one stepparent). A one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to evaluate this hypothesis.

Table 6

Stepchildren and Intact Children Multivariate T-Test Results

Variable	Group One		Group Two		F	Group
	Step-Children		Intact-Children			
	<u>N = 30</u>		<u>N = 30</u>			
Comparisons	M	SD	M	SD		
Cohesion	7.37	1.13	7.37	1.89	.000	1=2
Expressiveness	7.10	1.84	7.70	1.39	.161	1=2
Conflict	5.70	1.51	5.77	1.43	.861	1=2

\*p < .05

Family membership served as the independent variable which had three levels: mother, father, and child. Cohesion, Expressiveness, and Conflict dimensions of the two Family Environment Scales served as the dependent variables.

Results are presented in Table 7.

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) revealed a significant main effect for group membership (Wilks' Lambda = .508,  $F(6, 170) = 11.42$ ,  $p < .00001$ ). Therefore, separate univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) were performed on each dependent variable.

The first ANOVA for the dependent variable, Cohesion, revealed a significant difference ( $F(2, 87) = 6.25$ ,  $p <$

.0029). Post hoc comparisons between the three family members using the Tukey HSD method revealed a significant difference between the stepchildren's perceptions of family cohesion and the (step)fathers' perceptions of family cohesion. Fathers within stepfamilies reported perceiving less cohesion ( $M = 5.467$ ) than children of these families ( $M = 7.367$ ). No other comparisons were significant (i.e., mother/father or mother/child). For Expressiveness, there was a similar outcome ( $F(2, 87) = 11.26, p < .0000$ ). Tukey HSD post hoc revealed fathers within stepfamilies reported perceiving less expressiveness ( $M = 5.000$ ) than children within stepfamilies ( $M = 7.100$ ). Again, no other comparisons were significant. Finally, a significant difference was also found for the third dependent variable, Conflict ( $F(2, 87) = 10.29, p < .0001$ ). Tukey HSD post hoc revealed two significant comparisons; mother/child and father/child. For both comparisons, children within stepfamilies reported perceiving more conflict ( $M = 5.700$ ) than either mothers ( $M = 3.200$ ) or fathers ( $M = 3.933$ ) within stepfamilies. There was no significant difference between mothers and fathers.

The data did support the hypothesis that there would be differences between children and parental perceptions within stepfamilies. No significant differences were found between mothers' and fathers' within stepfamilies and how they perceived their family environment with regard to cohesion,



Table 7

Stepfamily (Mother, Father, Stepchild) MANOVA Results

Variable	Group One		Group Two		Group Three		F	Group
	Mothers N = 30	SD	Fathers N = 30	SD	Children N = 30	SD		
	M		M		M			
Cohesion	6.83	2.17	5.47	2.69	7.37	1.13	6.25	1=2;1=3;2<3
Expressiveness	5.90	1.75	5.00	1.55	7.10	1.84	11.26*	1=2;1=3;2<3
Conflict	3.20	2.46	3.93	2.48	5.70	1.51	10.29*	1=2;1<3;2<3

\*p &lt; .001

expressiveness, and conflict. Children within stepfamilies were more aligned with the mothers' perceptions of cohesion and expressiveness, however children reported more conflict than mothers. As for fathers within stepfamilies, there were significant differences between their perceptions and the children's perceptions. Fathers reported less cohesion and expressiveness than the children, whereas the children perceived more conflict than did fathers.

The final hypothesis assessed stepchild gender differences in regard to perceptions of cohesion, expressiveness, and conflict. A one-way multivariate of analysis (MANOVA) was performed using four levels of family membership: mother, father, female child, male child as the independent variables. The three dimensions of both the Family Environment Scales' (i.e. Cohesion, Expressiveness, Conflict) served as the dependent variables. Results are presented in Table 8.

The MANOVA was significant (Wilks' Lambda = .466,  $F(9, 204) = 8.38$ ,  $p < .0000$ ), family membership and gender were not equal. Thus, univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) were performed on each of the dependent variables across all four family membership levels.

The first ANOVA for Cohesion, revealed a significant difference, ( $F(3, 86) = 4.61$ ,  $p < .0048$ ). Post hoc comparisons between the four groups using the Scheffe post hoc method only revealed one significant difference, fathers

Table 8

Stepfamily Membership-Gender MANOVA Results

Variable	Group One		Group Two		Group Three		Group Four		F	Group
	Mothers	Fathers	Daughters	Sons	N = 30	N = 30	N = 30	N = 30		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Cohesion	6.63	2.17	5.47	2.69	7.72	1.03	6.83	1.03	4.61	1=2;1=3;1=4 2<3;2=4;3=4
Expressiveness	5.90	1.75	5.00	1.55	7.78	1.52	6.08	1.88	10.57**	1=2;1<3;1=4; 2<3;2=4;3=4
Conflict	3.20	2.46	3.93	2.48	5.33	1.46	6.25	1.48	7.30*	1=2;1=3;1<4 2=3;2=4;3=4

\*p < .001

\*\*p < .0001

in stepfamilies perceive less cohesion ( $M = 5.467$ ) than daughters within stepfamilies ( $M = 7.722$ ). No other comparisons were significant (i.e., mother/son, mother/daughter, or father/son). Regarding Expressiveness, univariate of analysis revealed a significant difference, ( $F(3, 86) = 10.57, p < .00001$ ) as well. Post hoc analysis revealed two significant comparisons. First, mothers report perceiving less expressiveness ( $M = 5.900$ ) than daughters ( $M = 7.778$ ) with no significant differences between mothers and sons. Second, fathers also report perceiving less expressiveness ( $M = 5.000$ ) than daughters ( $M = 7.778$ ). A final ANOVA for the variable of Conflict, was significant, ( $F(3, 86) = 7.30, p < .0002$ ). Post hoc comparisons indicated that sons within stepfamilies perceived more conflict ( $M = 6.250$ ) than mothers ( $M = 3.200$ ). Although not statistically significant, fathers in stepfamilies also report perceiving less conflict than do the sons.

In summary, the results support the hypothesis that male and female stepchildren perceive their family environments differently. Female stepchildren tend to perceive more cohesion and expressiveness than male stepchildren, while male stepchildren report more conflict than female stepchildren.

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to expand the research on the effects of stepfamilies on children. Currently, there is limited information regarding the relationship between stepchildren and family functioning. Furthermore, there are no studies to date that have explored the younger child's perceptions of his or her family environment. This study explored perceptions of interpersonal family environment in young stepchildren and their reconstituted parents (one biological parent and one stepparent), as well as comparing these to the perceptions of children from intact families and their parents. The data obtained support most, but not all, of the hypotheses.

Hypothesis one predicted that parents of stepchildren would report more negative perceptions of their family environments than parents of intact families. Results demonstrated that the two groups of mothers (mothers of stepfamilies and mothers of intact families) did not differ in their perceptions of cohesion, expressiveness, or conflict. However, fathers of stepfamilies did report more negative perceptions of their family environment than fathers of intact families. Stepfathers did not report any

differences with intact fathers regarding perception of conflict or comfort with expression of feelings and opinions, but they did perceive less commitment, helpfulness, and support (Cohesion dimension). This finding is consistent with the results obtained in a study of stepfather-adolescent relationships (Pink & Wampler, 1985) which reported that both stepfathers and stepchildren perceived less cohesion and adaptability than intact families.

Several factors may have contributed to these findings. First, the results obtained for the mothers is inconsistent with results obtained in previous studies (Dahl, Cowgill, & Asmundsson, 1987; Duberman, 1973; Furstenberg, 1987; Jones, 1978; Kosinski, 1983; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) which suggested that stepmothers have more difficulty adjusting to stepchildren. This study's finding was most likely impacted by the small representation of stepmothers. All but eight of the sample were biological mothers. Thus, these results are not generalizable to stepmother relationships.

An important point to take into consideration when evaluating explanations for the stepfather outcome, is the average number of years this sample of stepfather/mother remarriages had existed at the time of study, ( $M = 3.0$ ). Three years is a relatively short period of time for members to adjust to a new family. Although research reports that the number of years married does not impact or change the

quality of stepparent-stepchild relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 1984; Hobart, 1989; Pink & Wampler, 1985; Sauer & Fine, 1988), Visher and Visher (1982) suggest that it takes a stepfamily an average of five to seven years before every member adjusts to and accepts their role and other members' roles in the new family unit. An additional time factor that could affect a stepfather's perception of cohesion, is the amount of time the biological mother and child had lived as a single-parent family. The child's average age at time of divorce was 3.2 years, with an average age at remarriage of 5.8 years. That leaves approximately two and one-half years for the mother and child to establish a close and stable relationship, possibly making it even more difficult for the new stepfather to integrate into the family.

Another possible explanation is that stepfathers may view themselves as outsiders or a "fifth wheel". Hobart (1989) found that remarried parents often cited stress from favoritism toward and jealousy of children as the most frequent difficulty in their relationship. Also, wives (biological mothers) reported greater disappointment in their spouse (stepfather) as a parent. This supports a study by Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1982) which found that stepfathers tend to fall in one of two categories; either they are inattentive, disengaged, and provide little childrearing support or they are overly involved, restrictive, and their support is unwelcomed by the mothers.

A final explanation for this perceived lack of cohesion could be that some stepfathers with biological children who live with an ex-spouse feel a great deal of pain, loss, and regret that they are not spending more time with their own children. Consequently, they may feel guilty and withdraw or hold back their involvement and commitment to the stepfamily (Brooks, 1981; Visher & Visher, 1979). This is supported by Duberman (1973) who found that if a stepfather was divorced, he had a 54% chance of having an excellent relationship with his stepchildren, whereas, if he was never married, this increased to 85%.

Hypothesis two predicted that stepchildren would have more negative perceptions of their family environments than children from intact families. The results did not confirm this hypothesis. Although this is inconsistent with several other studies (Anderson & White, 1986; Bowerman & Irish, 1962; Clingempeel, Brand, & Ievoli, 1984; Halperin & Smith, 1983; Pink & Wampler, 1985; Sauer & Fine, 1988) the majority of those studies assessed adolescents and college students, with younger children's perspectives not being evaluated. It is possible that the child's age impacts adjustment and consequently, their perceptions of their family environment. Research suggests that younger children are much more accepting of stepparents than older children and adolescents (Hetherington et al, 1982; Santrock, 1972; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Additionally, as the role of stepparent,



particularly stepfather, has become more common in our society, children may not feel or perceive themselves as "different." Finally, the instrument used to evaluate the childrens' perceptions may have influenced the obtained results. The Children's Version of the Family Environment Scale (CVFES) is not as psychometrically sound as would be desired. There are validity problems and limitations to the normative data. Given that there is a tremendous void of psychometrically sound instruments which can assess perceptions of family environment in younger children, efforts to develop these type of measures is important.

Hypothesis three predicted significant differences, but not directionality of family perception between the stepchildren and their parents (one biological and one stepparent). Results revealed significant differences for each measured dimension of family environment. Regarding Cohesion and Expressiveness, fathers reported perceiving less cohesion and less expressiveness than stepchildren. Stepchildren on the other hand, reported perceiving more conflict than either parent.

Many of the possible factors explored in hypothesis one may help to clarify why fathers' of stepfamilies perceived less cohesion and expressiveness among and between family members. Such factors include the length of remarriage at time of study, length of time the mother and child spent as a single-parent family, loss and guilt over leaving his own

children and parenting children other than his own, and feeling as an outsider. A study by Anderson and White (1986) suggested that many of these factors do impact the functioning and quality of functioning within a stepfamily environment. They found that stepfamilies, as a group, reported significantly stronger biological parent-child coalitions than intact families. In addition, while functional stepfamilies exhibited a tendency for having biological parent-child coalitions, the dysfunctional stepfamilies reported not only an extreme pattern of strong biological parent-child coalitions, but also a negative relationship between stepparent and stepchild. Anecdotal data collected from children in the study found that there was less positive involvement between stepparent and stepchild if the children perceived pressure for premature cohesion and openness. On the other hand, a stepparent's acceptance of distance and gradual evolution of closeness can encourage positive involvement between stepparent and stepchild.

In the present study, it is possible that fathers perceived less cohesion and expressiveness than either mothers or stepchildren, in part because they desired to have these qualities which did not exist at that time. Whereas other members of the stepfamily may have already felt they had these qualities (i.e., mother to father; mother to child; child to mother) or did not want these

qualities (i.e., child to stepparent). Also, given the fairly short length of time of remarriage, stepfathers may be choosing to take a "backseat" in hopes of creating future closeness with their stepchildren. Finally, stepfathers may still be working through their own feelings of loss, guilt, and adjustment. One stepfather in particular voluntarily offered his own comments. He stated, "It is hard for me to act loving to my stepchildren in front of my own biological children, I feel like I am betraying my children. And I know this must be confusing to my stepchildren, so it is easier to withdraw."

As for stepchildren perceiving more conflict than either parent, there are no studies to date that compare perceptions of family environment with such young children and their parents. In addition, the measure used for assessing these young children, as well as the comparison between the two family environment measures is presently experimental in nature. Thus, these results must be interpreted with caution.

It is interesting to note that Moos and Moos (1986) identified some parent-child differences within the normative samples of the Family Environment Scale (FES). They noted that adolescents perceived more conflict and emphasis on achievement than parental figures. Furthermore, they felt this finding was consistent with other findings in other settings which indicate people (such as parents) who

have more authority and responsibility in an environment tend to view that environment more positively than people (such as children and adolescents) who have less authority and responsibility. Although this study is comparing two separate instruments (FES & CVFES), rather than comparing the one (FES), this premise could offer some explanation for the results obtained in this study regarding how young children perceive conflict.

As previously discussed in greater detail, it is also possible that these children feel their roles are being usurped by the addition of a new parental figure. The addition of a stepfather may seriously disrupt an already stable and perhaps comfortable role developed in the single-parent family (Anderson & White, 1986; Sauer & Fine, 1988). If the stepfather attempts to adopt the role of disciplinarian or expects to instantly love and be loved by the stepchildren, even greater levels of family tension may develop (Visher & Visher, 1982).

Hypothesis four predicted there would be a significant difference between male and female stepchildren and their perceptions of family functioning. Furthermore, this hypothesis provided additional information about the differences that were found in hypothesis three.

Overall, results revealed that stepfathers of daughters (female stepchildren) perceived less cohesion and both parents perceived less expressiveness with their daughters.

Sons (male stepchildren) however, reported more conflict with their biological mothers, but not their stepfathers. It appears from the results of hypothesis three and four that stepfathers may feel or perceive less cohesion and expressiveness from daughters than they do from sons. As for conflict, not only did sons report more conflict than daughters, but they also perceived their anger as being projected towards their mothers.

In explaining these results, it is important to again make note that the child measure is experimental in nature. However, there is research that appears to support these results. Generally, studies have found that opposite sex parent-child relationships, regardless of family status, (i.e., intact, single-parent, or stepfamily) tend to be more difficult (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1978; Margolin & Patterson, 1975; Santrock & Warshak, 1979). Several studies have found that stepdaughters have more difficulty adjusting to either gender of stepparent (Bowerman & Irish, 1962; Clingempeel, Brand, & Ievoli, 1984; Duberman, 1973; Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1978; Jones, 1978; Santrock, 1972; Santrock & Warshak, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Regarding levels of cohesion and expressiveness, Clingempeel et al. (1984) found that daughters (between the ages of 9 and 12 years) emitted a lower proportion of verbal behaviors, in particular positive verbal behaviors to both parents and a higher proportion of negative problem-solving

behaviors towards the stepparent. Thus, providing some explanation as to why both parents perceived less expressiveness from their (step)daughters. Although this study appears to be consistent with Clingempeel et al.'s (1984) study, the authors offered no explanation for their outcome other than daughters may fear the presence of a stepfather will disrupt the mother-daughter bond.

As for sons reporting more conflict, Hetherington, Cox & Cox (1978) found the mother-son relationship after divorce to be more problematic than the mother-daughter relationship suggesting that boys welcome the same sex parent figure. However, another explanation for this outcome is provided by Slater, Stewart, & Linn (1983) who found that male adolescents in single-parent families reported less conflict and more independence than male adolescents in two-parent families. Stepsons in this study may have been angry with their mothers for remarrying and usurping possible roles they had assumed (i.e., "the man of the house"), as well as eliminating perceived freedoms/independence.

In summary, many of the findings in this study are consistent with previous studies, despite the age differential of the children and the fact that most stepfamilies consisted of a biological mother and stepfather. There were some differences between stepfamilies and intact families, however only with respect to the stepparent. Stepfathers perceived less commitment,

helpfulness, and support (Cohesion) than fathers from intact families. Interestingly, children of stepfamilies did not perceive any family environmental differences from children of intact families with regard to cohesion, expressiveness, or conflict. There are however, perceived differences among family members within stepfamilies. Stepfathers reported less cohesion and expressiveness, while stepchildren perceived more conflict. More specifically, biological mothers perceived less expressiveness with their daughters while, stepfathers perceived less of both ( e.g., cohesion and expressiveness) with their stepdaughters. As for conflict, male children perceived more conflict than female children, and this conflict was perceived to be directed towards their biological mothers, not stepfathers.

#### Study Limitations

A significant limitation with this study is the lack of generalizability. There are several factors which contribute to this limitation. The first is that no theoretical model of stepfamily functioning exists to help guide research. Consequently, many outcome/comparative studies, such as this, present a deficit-comparison approach (i.e., comparisons are made with intact families which represents the standard to which stepfamilies are compared.) More longitudinal studies of stepfamilies without comparisons to intact families are needed to help establish "normal" stepfamily development and functioning and then

provide a theoretical base upon which to compare stepfamilies against.

Second, this research study utilized a cross-sectional methodological design, meaning that subjects were evaluated at one point in time only. According to Baltes, Reese, & Nesselroade (1988), cross-sectional designs reduce the external validity due to the confounding of age and cohort. A more appropriate research design would be a longitudinal sequential design which separates out age from cohort effects.

A third limitation is the instrument utilized to measure children's perceptions of family environment. The CVFES has limited validity and normative information. Furthermore, minor modifications were made to facilitate children's understanding of the instrument items. These modifications need further validation.

Fourth, both measures used in this study were self-report. Often these type of measures have greater face validity, allowing subjects a greater opportunity to answer items in either a favorable manner (i.e., "socially desirable") or an unfavorable manner (i.e., highly distressed). Without additional sources of verification, there is no way of validating the accuracy of the subjects' responses, thus, potentially limiting the generalizability to any group.



Fifth, the subjects who participated in the study were not randomly selected, they were all volunteers. Consequently, only families who felt comfortable with the study were motivated to participate. It was easy to obtain the participation of intact families, however stepfamilies were not only reluctant to initially review the material, but several stepfamilies withdrew from participation. This poses the question as to whether stepfamilies perceive their family functioning more negatively and are stigmatized by past and present labels. The general public's lack of information concerning stepfamilies may be unduly influencing these stepfamilies.

Sixth, subjects who participated were predominantly caucasian, middle to upper-middle class and well-educated. In fact, 100% of all stepfamily subjects were caucasian. Thus, results of this study are limited only to families with similar characteristics.

Seventh, only one child, and their mother and father, participated in this study. Again, results are limited to these groups only. Future research is needed that includes all permutations of stepfamilies (i.e., biological siblings, half-siblings, step-siblings, noncustodial parents etc.) in an effort to assess whether family relationships and their interactions impact family functioning and how.

Finally, the difficulty recruiting stepfamilies who are willing to participate often prevents obtaining large sample

sizes thus, limiting generalizability. Not only was this study's sample small, but the complexity and pluralism of stepfamilies were not adequately represented (i.e., stepmothers).

### Implications

Even though the use and applications of the CVFES in this study were experimental in nature, the results appear to offer initial information regarding perceptions of familial functioning of young stepchildren and their parents. Additionally, other research, although not with young children, appears to be consistent with many of these findings. Still more research in this area is needed to gain a clearer understanding of how stepchildren and stepparents view their family life, in particular identifying what impacts their perceptions and what would facilitate a smoother family transition.

However, this study has yielded some valuable information with regard to clinical interventions. Based on these data, stepfathers appear to perceive themselves as "an outsider looking in", they reported a reduced sense of support, togetherness, and commitment. Stepfathers perceived a lack of openness and expressiveness between themselves and their stepchildren, particularly stepdaughters. The data also suggest that stepchildren perceived more conflict within their family unit than did

parents. Boys perceived significantly more anger and conflict than their biological mothers.

Evaluating the stepfather-stepchild relationship, as well as the biological mother-child coalition may help provide valuable insights as to the feelings and behavioral patterns that are elicited directly and indirectly. It would be helpful to seek answers to questions such as: What "myths" (i.e., must love each immediately, etc.) are operating among stepfamily members? Are members attempting to create cohesion prematurely? Is the stepfather still working through grief, loss, and guilt with his own children? Does the mother support the stepfather's role? Is the child having difficulty accepting the stepfather into the family? What kinds of losses or gains does the child perceive by having the addition of a stepfather?

Evaluating child developmental factors would also help clarify problem areas such as exploring the child's definition and beliefs about conflict. At a younger age, children's perceptions of anger and conflict may be more variable. An argument, scolding, or punishment for example, may color their interpretations of familial conflict on a daily basis, as opposed to answering instrument questions with "the big picture" in mind. Understanding when children are able to synthesize the "good" and "bad" in people and recognize cause and effect can be helpful in responding to children's perceptions of family functioning.

Treatment goals geared towards creating a balanced biological parent-child coalition and positive stepfather-stepchild relations that allow for the development of cohesion at the individual's pace are encouraged. Interventions that may facilitate this process can focus on improving stepfamily relations by clarifying all members' expectations regarding the nature of their relationships, including such issues as the desire for greater closeness and openness or a preference for some distance until they feel more comfortable. Helping them establish more realistic expectations about themselves, each other, and especially the time required to effectively integrate their identity as a stepfamily. Identifying, discussing, and dispelling common "myths" such as they must instantly love one another and that the stepparent is taking the place of the biological parent. Finally, educating stepfamily members on various skills such as communication techniques and problem-solving skills would help to facilitate comfort with expression and development of cohesion.

This study only offers an initial view of how families with young stepchildren function. Continued research is needed to validate these results and provide additional information about family functioning. There is a sizable body of research which suggests adolescents have the hardest time adjusting to a stepfamily, but until information regarding young childrens' adjustment and perceptions is

obtained, that statement may be premature. Information about the family environment and young children's perceptions are needed in order to provide developmentally appropriate interventions. Additionally, efforts directed at developing psychometrically sound instruments for young children are desperately needed.

To gain a broader understanding of individual and family functioning for young children, research studies should include more diverse samples, children of different race and cultural identities, geographic location, younger children, and differences in stepfamilies who have been in treatment for familial adjustment problems. Further research should be done to identify additional gender differences, evaluate why these exist, and how they impact individual family functioning. It seems important to generate more research studies that include other family members such as the noncustodial parent, grandparents, and siblings; whole, half, and step. And finally, future studies should focus on both stepmother and stepfather families utilizing longitudinal designs which would allow for comparisons of the two family groups, as well as the child's relationships with both biological parents and stepparents.

In conclusion, this study offers valuable, although preliminary, information about stepfamilies with young children. This study found that stepchildren and children

from intact families have similar perceptions in regard to their interpersonal family functioning. Furthermore, this study supports previous research in that stepfamilies have been found to be less cohesive (Anderson & White, 1986; Brooks, 1981; Duberman, 1973; Hobart, 1989; Pink & Wampler, 1985; Visher and Visher, 1979). Despite research suggesting stepfamilies face many challenges, very little is known about how young stepchildren and their families view themselves within the context of the stepfamily environment. Continued research efforts are needed in this area to fully understand the developmental impact remarriage has on children.

**APPENDIX A**  
**DESCRIPTION OF STUDY**

## DESCRIPTION OF STUDY

Dear Parents:

I am a Counseling Psychology doctoral student from University of North Texas. I am conducting some research under the supervision of Dr. David Baker to meet the requirements for my dissertation.

The purpose of this study is to gain information regarding young children's perceptions of family environments. Of particular interest, is to determine if there are differences for children from intact family or stepfamily structures. I will administer one test to each child who participates in the study. This test examines how the child perceives their family environment and will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. In addition, you are requested to complete a brief demographic questionnaire, a permission form, and one test which also examines how you, the parents, perceive your family environment. Estimated time of commitment is 45 minutes.

All responses on the tests and on the questionnaire will be gathered in strict compliance with the American Psychological Association guidelines for human subjects participation. Responses will be completely anonymous. All identifying information will remain confidential and responses will be recorded so as not to identify you or your child. No one will know or have access to yours or your child's scores. All results of this study will be reported as group data, not as individual responses. In addition, you have the right to withdraw from this study at any point.

If you should have any questions about this study, please contact Lisa Elliott at (817) 565-2671.

Your cooperation and efforts are greatly appreciated.

Lisa Elliott  
Doctoral Candidate/Researcher  
University of North Texas  
Denton, TX 76203

Dr. David Baker  
Assistant Professor/Research Advisor  
University of North Texas  
Denton, TX 76203



**APPENDIX B**  
**RESEARCH CONSENT FORM**

## RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

I, \_\_\_\_\_ agree to participate in a study of family characteristics. The purpose of this study is to obtain information about children and parents from stepfamilies and intact families. I understand that I will be asked to complete two questionnaires about myself, my (step)child, and my family's characteristics. I have been informed that completion of these questionnaires will take approximately 45 minutes.

As parent/stepparent/legal guardian of \_\_\_\_\_, I also give consent for my child's participation in this study. I understand that he/she will be asked to complete a pictorial questionnaire about his/her family's characteristics. Completion of this questionnaire will take approximately 20 minutes.

I understand that the information gathered will be used for research purposes and that it will be recorded in a manner that will not identify me or my child.

I understand that there are no personal risks for me or my child directly associated with this study. I also understand that my child or I can withdraw from participation in the study at any time without penalty or prejudice.

If I have questions or difficulties related to my participation or my child's participation in the study, I should contact Lisa Elliott, researcher, at (817) 565-2671.

My child has either read this form or has been given an explanation of this project and has agreed to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Child's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX C  
DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FORM

## DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FORM

## Stepfamilies

Please answer all the questions by either circling the appropriate response or filling in the correct information.

Child Information

1. What is the age of your child?
  - a) 8 years
  - b) 9 years
  - c) 10 years
  
2. What is the sex of your child?
  - a) Female
  - b) Male
  
3. What is your child's present grade in school?
  
  
4. What is your child's race?
  - a) Black/African American
  - b) Native American
  - c) Caucasian/White
  - d) Mexican American
  - e) Asian American
  - f) Other (Please Specify)
  
  
5. What is your child's place of residence/custodial residence?
  - a) Both natural parents
  - b) Mother/Stepfather
  - c) Father/Stepmother
  - d) Other (Please Specify)
  
  
6. What was your child's age at the time of their natural parent's divorce?
  
  
7. What was your child's age at the time of remarriage?

## Demographic Information Form (continued)

Family Information

1. As the questionnaire respondent, you are:
  - a) Mother
  - b) Father
  - c) Stepmother
  - d) Stepfather
  
2. As the questionnaire respondent, your race is:
  - a) Black/African American
  - b) Native American
  - c) Caucasian/White
  - d) Mexican American
  - e) Asian American
  - f) Other (Please Specify)
  
3. What is the marital status of the child's natural parents?  
  
Mother:
  - a) Intact first marriage
  - b) Divorced and single
  - c) Divorced and remarried
  - d) Have never been married
  - e) Other (Please Explain)  
Father:
  - a) Intact first marriage
  - b) Divorced and single
  - c) Divorced and remarried
  - d) Have never been married
  - e) Other (Please Explain)
  
4. What is your highest level of education?  
  
Mother/Stepmother:
  - a) 0 to 11th grade
  - b) High school graduate
  - c) Some college credit
  - d) College graduate
  - e) Masters degree
  - f) Ph.D., J.D., M.D. or equivalent

## Demographic Information Form (continued)

4. What is your highest level of education?

Father/Stepfather:

- a) 0 to 11th grade
- b) High school graduate
- c) Some college credit
- d) College graduate
- e) Masters degree
- f) Ph.D., J.D., M.D. or equivalent

5. As the questionnaire respondent, what is your occupation? What is your spouse's occupation?

6. Are there any other siblings, stepsiblings or half siblings? Please specify the number and ages of each.

7. How long has this marriage/relationship existed?

## DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FORM

## Intact Families

Please answer all the questions by either circling the appropriate response or filling in the correct information.

Child Information

1. What is the age of your child?
  - a) 8 years
  - b) 9 years
  - c) 10 years
2. What is the sex of your child?
  - a) Female
  - b) Male
3. What is your child's present grade in school?
4. What is your child's race?
  - a) Black/African American
  - b) Native American
  - c) Caucasian/White
  - d) Mexican American
  - e) Asian American
  - f) Other (Please Specify)
5. What is your child's place of residence/custodial residence?
  - a) Both natural parents
  - b) Mother/Stepfather
  - c) Father/Stepmother
  - d) Other (Please Specify)

Family Information

1. As the questionnaire respondent, you are:
  - a) Mother
  - b) Father
  - c) Stepmother
  - d) Stepfather
2. As the questionnaire respondent, your race is:
  - a) Black/African American
  - b) Native American
  - c) Caucasian/White
  - d) Mexican American
  - e) Asian American
  - f) Other (Please Specify)

## Demographic Information Form (continued)

3. What is the marital status of the child's natural parents?
- Mother:
- a) Intact first marriage
  - b) Other (Please Explain)
- Father:
- a) Intact first marriage
  - b) Other (Please Explain)
4. What is your highest level of education?
- Mother:
- a) 0 to 11th grade
  - b) High school graduate
  - c) Some college credit
  - d) College graduate
  - e) Masters degree
  - f) Ph.D., J.D., M.D. or equivalent
- Father:
- a) 0 to 11th grade
  - b) High school graduate
  - c) Some college credit
  - d) College graduate
  - e) Masters degree
  - f) Ph.D., J.D., M.D. or equivalent
5. As the questionnaire respondent, what is your occupation? What is your spouse's occupation?
6. Are there any other siblings, stepsiblings or half siblings? Please specify the number and ages of each.
7. How long has this marriage/relationship existed?



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