TO TELL OR NOT TO TELL?

AN EXAMINATION OF STEPPARENTS’ COMMUNICATION PRIVACY MANAGEMENT

Tsai-chen Hsu, B.A.

Thesis Prepared for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

August 2010

APPROVED:

Karen Anderson, Major Professor
John M. Allison, Jr., Committee Member and Chair of the Department of Communication Studies
Brian Richardson, Committee Member
James D. Meernik, Acting Dean of the Robert B. Toulouse School of Graduate Studies
Hsu, Tsai-chen. *To tell or not to tell? A study of stepparents’ communication privacy management*. Master of Arts (Communication Studies), August 2010, 70 pp., references, 65 titles.

This study examined stepparents’ privacy boundary management when engaging in communicative interactions with stepchildren. I utilized Petronio’s communication privacy management theory to investigate stepparents’ motivations of disclosing or concealing from stepchildren as well as how stepparents’ gender influences such motivations. Moreover, present research also explored types of privacy dilemma within stepfamily households from stepparent perspectives. Fifteen stepfathers and 15 stepmothers received in-depth interviews about their self-disclosing and concealment experiences with stepchildren. I identified confidant dilemma and accidental dilemma in stepfamily households from stepparents’ perspectives, as well as stepparents’ gender differences in self-disclosing and concealing motivations. Findings also suggest that stepparents reveal and conceal from stepchildren out of same motivations: establishing good relationships, viewing stepchildren as own children, helping stepchildren with problems resulting from the divorce and viewing stepchildren as “others.” The result also indicates that stepparents experienced dialectical tensions between closedness and openness during the decision of revealing or concealing from stepchildren.
Copyright 2010

by

Tsai-chen Hsu
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Privacy Management Theory (CPM)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPM in Families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPM in Stepfamilies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. METHOD</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. RESULTS</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privacy Dilemmas in Stepfamilies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivations of Disclosure and Concealment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepparent Gender Differences in Disclosing and Concealing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. DISCUSSION</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialectical Theory</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Privacy Management Theory</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

With the increasing U.S. divorce rate and constant changes in family dynamics, stepfamilies have become one of the prominent family types that merits broader and deeper understanding (Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Golish, 2003). Complexity of the stepfamily requires stepfamily members to negotiate new roles, rules, boundaries, and identities. Stepfamilies often go through turbulent stages due to the different backgrounds and identities members bring to the family (Afifi, 2003; Banker & Gaertner, 1998; Caughlin, Golish, Olson, Sargent, Cook & Petronio, 2000; Cissna, Cox & Bochner, 1990; Ganong & Coleman, 1994, 2004; Golish, 2000; Golish & Caughlin, 2002). Stepparent-stepchild relationships are one of the most complex and challenging relationships in the stepfamily context (Ganong & Coleman, 1994, 2004; Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999). Stepparent-stepchildren relationships are often formed involuntarily, and the lack of early childhood bonding and shared history commonly found in the parent-child relationship often cause problems in stepparent-stepchild relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 1994, 2004; Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999).

According to Adeyemo and Onongha (2008) and Golish (2003), effective communication has a positive impact on the quality of stepparent-stepchild relationships, which is an important indication of overall stepfamily happiness. Moreover, Golish (2003) examined the communication strategies that characterize and differentiate strong stepfamilies from stepfamilies having difficulties. Stepfamilies all face similar challenges; however, successful stepfamilies adopt certain stepparent-stepchild communication strategies, such as openness and communicating emotions with other family members, to help them minimize the challenges of stepfamilies and facilitate relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Golish, 2003). According to Schrodt, Soliz, and Braithwaite (2008), stepfamily satisfaction was positively related to the
frequency of everyday talk that stepparents engage with their stepchildren. Overall, researchers (Baxter, Braithwaite & Nicholson, 1999; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Golish, 2003) have argued that communication between stepparents and stepchildren is a crucial aspect of achieving harmony within stepfamilies.

On the contrary, ineffective or lack of communication between stepparent and stepchild could result in a malfunctioning relationship, a decrease in harmony, and even result in psychological problems or overall decreased well-being of the stepchild (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). For example, Schrodt (2006) examined the relationship between perceived stepparent communication competences (stepparents can communicate in ways that are assertive, yet appropriate, socially skilled, patient, and flexible) and mental health of stepchildren. He identified five types of stepfamilies according to the degree of perceived stepparent communication competence: bonded, functional, ambivalent, evasive, and conflictual stepfamilies. Schrodt (2006) further concluded that among the five stepfamily types, stepchildren in evasive and conflictual stepfamily types reported having more mental health symptoms.

As already noted, stepparent-stepchild communication is one of the crucial indicators of stepchild well-being as well as stepfamily satisfaction. Researchers (Afifi, 2003; Afifi et al., 2007; Golish, 2000; Golish & Caughlin, 2002; MacManus, 2007) have further concluded that stepparents’ disclosing behaviors to stepchildren are one of the indicators of stepparent-stepchild communication that influences stepparent-stepchild relationships. As a result, additional exploration of stepparents’ self-disclosure may contribute to a better understanding of stepparent-stepchild communications as well as stepparent-stepchild relationships. Based on Petronio’s (2002) Communication privacy management Theory (CPM), I examined stepparents’ privacy boundary management in order to understand how stepparents monitor themselves when engaging in self-disclosure and concealment with stepchildren.
One of the challenges stepparents and stepchildren confront is the negotiation of boundaries, especially privacy boundaries (Golish, 2000; Golish & Caughlin, 2002). Petronio (2002) proposed CPM theory as a way to understand how people manage privacy issues within interpersonal or intrapersonal relationships through self-disclosures. By using the notion of a metaphoric boundary, Petronio, Ellemers, Giles, and Gallois (1998) explained that CPM theory “assumes that people feel they own their private disclosures. As such, they have a right to control who knows the information” (p. 577). They have further suggested that individuals develop rules to “open up the boundaries around private information” (p. 577) in order to regulate how much others should know about themselves.

Petronio (2002) indicated that individuals become interdependent over time and individual privacy boundaries inevitably begin to overlap. With the combination of two different family backgrounds, stepfamilies often have to re-coordinate privacy boundaries among stepfamily members. Without shared family history and the presence of role ambiguity, stepfamily members may create rigid rules about privacy boundaries that separate them from first-married family members (Caughlin & Petronio, 2006; Caughlin, Golish, Olson, Sargent, Cook, & Patronio, 2000).

Privacy Rules

Petronio (2002) defined privacy rules as criteria people use to control privacy boundary accessibility. Thus, privacy rules are the guidelines individuals use to make a decision to reveal or conceal personal information. In making decisions to reveal or conceal, individuals often take into account criteria such as cultural issues, motivations, situational factors, gender, and/or the cost of revealing.

Gender is an important factor when managing privacy rules in self-disclosing (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993; Petronio, Martin, & Littlefield, 1984).
Caldwell and Peplau (1982) concluded that women are more willing to disclose private information as compared to men. Furthermore, Petronio et al. (1984) indicated that women tend to have different self-disclosing prerequisites and different privacy boundary management than men. Moreover, Rubin and Shenker (1978) suggested that women were more comfortable with disclosing intimate topics than men, and took self-disclosure as a more important influence in friendship satisfaction as compared to men. Gender has also influenced parents’ privacy boundary management when making decisions about whether to self-disclose to children (Afifi et al., 2007; Horan, Houser, & Cowan, 2007). Pacey (2005) explored the relationship between stepparent’s gender and parenting issues. Moore and Cartwright (2005) examined stepchildren’s perceived expectations on stepparent’s responsibilities according to stepparents’ gender. Nevertheless, no researchers have explored stepparents’ gender differences on altering their self-disclosing or concealing behaviors. In this study I explore how the privacy management of stepparents differs based on gender.

**Boundary Turbulence/Privacy Dilemmas**

As previously noted, stepfamily members may create rigid rules about privacy boundaries and often experience difficulties in trying to re-coordinate personal and family privacy boundaries (Caughlin & Petronio, 2006; Caughlin et al., 2000). As a result, stepfamily members experience boundary turbulence more frequently than first married families before achieving the balance of a new family identity (Caughlin & Petronio, 2006). Petronio (2002) indicated that boundary turbulence occurs when the level of privacy permeability is not coordinated between the co-owners of private information. Boundary turbulence could also result from the different criteria people use to develop privacy rules or the violations or misuse of privacy rules. For example, people from different cultural backgrounds treat privacy differently (Moore, 1984, as cited in Petronio, 2002); thus someone may invade the privacy of others from a different cultural
background because he or she has different privacy rules. Privacy dilemmas represent a form of privacy rule violation that often results from privacy boundary turbulence (Petronio, 2000, 2002). Petronio (2002) suggested that a privacy dilemma “reflects the problem of knowing private information that, if kept confidential, has the potential to cause family problems and, if told, may result in conflict” (p. 200). Without common background or shared family identity, stepfamilies tend to have more rigid privacy boundary rules than first-married families, which often results in privacy rule violation or boundary turbulence (Caughlin et al., 2000), and boundary turbulence may result in further privacy dilemmas (Petronio, 2002). Petronio (2002) identified four types of privacy dilemmas in families: confidant dilemmas, accidental dilemmas, illicit privacy dilemmas, and interdependence dilemmas. However, privacy dilemmas have not yet been examined within the stepfamily context. Therefore, a primary goal of this study is to understand what types of privacy dilemmas exist in the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Specifically, I examine the types of privacy dilemmas established by Petronio (2000) and explore the possible emergence of other privacy dilemmas unique to the stepparent-stepchild relationship.

Some researchers (Afifi, 2003; Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Caughlin et al., 2000; Golish & Caughlin, 2002; Mazur & Ebesu Hubbard, 2004; Petronio & Caughlin, 2006) have utilized CPM theory to understand how family and stepfamily members communicate with one another regarding privacy issues. As noted previously, a context as complex as the stepfamily will inevitably generate more privacy boundary turbulence, especially in stepparent-stepchild relationships. Nevertheless, the influence of CPM in stepparent-stepchild relationships has received far less attention. Previous researchers (Afifi, 2003; Afifi, Mcmanus, Hutchinson, & Baker, 2007) have explored how stepchildren perceive self-disclosures from stepparents and the influence of those disclosures on the stepparent-stepchild relationships, and other researchers explored how privacy management of stepparents influences stepchildren’s reaction toward the
relationship (Mazur & Ebesu Hubbard, 2004). No researchers have examined how stepparents monitor themselves when disclosing private information to their stepchildren. By exploring this topic, I provide a better understanding of stepparents’ self-monitoring process of privacy management when communicating with stepchildren. Such knowledge could help stepparents engage in more effective communication with stepchildren and facilitate better stepparent-stepchild relationships. Hence, in this project I explore the reasons stepparents offer when deciding whether to disclose private information to their stepchildren.

Thus, in this study, I explore how CPM functions in the stepfamily context through the examination of privacy dilemmas, how stepparents monitor their own self-disclosure to stepchildren, as well as stepparents’ gender differences in his or her self-disclosure behaviors. In order to achieve these objectives, I conducted 30 in-depth interviews with stepparents which included open ended questions about self-disclosure experiences with their stepchildren. Communication privacy management (Petronio, 2002) was used as the theoretical framework to analyze stepparents’ monitoring of their self-disclosing behaviors, the influence of stepparents’ gender on self-disclosing behaviors, as well as the emergence of other types of privacy dilemmas.

Chapter 2 includes an overview of CPM theory, the relevant literature to the contexts of families and stepfamilies as well as my research questions. Chapter 3 explains my research method, participant solicitation criteria and process, and the process for data analysis. In chapter 4, I present the results of the study and finally, in Chapter 5, I discuss the findings and suggest limitations and future research directions.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication privacy management (CPM) theory (Petronio, 2000) presumes that individuals make decisions about revealing or concealing personal information based on certain criteria and conditions. Petronio (2000) suggested that individuals believe they possess an absolute right to regulate access to their private information, and such regulation sometimes inevitably affects other people. In order to have a thorough understanding of how CPM as a communicative strategy influences stepparents’ self-disclosing behavior, I first provide an overview of how CPM theory explains individuals’ communicative behavior regarding privacy issues and also how it influences human communication in different contexts and situations. Second, I explicate how CPM works as an effective theoretical framework that helps researchers better understand communication among family members. Finally, I introduce previous research that has examined the function of CPM in the stepfamily context and how CPM influences stepparent-stepchild relationships.

Communication Privacy Management (CPM)

In the development of CPM theory, Petronio (2002) has argued that people have ownership and control of their private information. Individuals construct metaphorical boundaries, called privacy boundaries, to mark ownership and to control the flow of private information as they interact with other people. Communication between individuals inevitably involves constant boundary management between public and private issues. Petronio (2000, 2002) has examined the changeability of privacy choices focusing on decision making about whether to reveal or conceal private information. Furthermore, Petronio (2000, 2002) has explored the dialectical nature of private disclosures, which involves the tension forces between the desire to conceal and
reveal simultaneously.

During the process of regulating private disclosures, individuals tend to create privacy boundaries that include people (the shareholders) with whom they decide to share their secrets and to exclude people with whom they do not wish to share any information. When individuals disclose, the act of disclosure indicates that the discloser is willing to give up a certain degree of ownership and control of the private information. Consequently, people develop “privacy rules” to regulate privacy boundaries and decide whether to reveal or conceal.

Privacy Rules

Privacy rules are the specific guidelines individuals establish for themselves regarding what information is considered private and withheld from others and what information is considered important to disclose in a particular relationship (Petronio, 2002). Individuals establish privacy rules in order to manage their privacy boundaries. Petronio (2002) indicated that “one reason we find it necessary to control our privacy boundaries is because we need to balance the risks and gains of revealing private information” (p. 65). The perceived benefits of disclosure include the expectation to facilitate expression, self-clarification, social validation, relationship development, and social control. At the same time, people take risk levels and risk types into consideration when deciding whether to reveal private information. Risk types include security risks, stigma risks, face risks, relational risks, and role risks (Petronio, 2002). Individuals consider these benefits and risks in the establishment of privacy rules.

While individuals develop general privacy rules for disclosure, individuals also develop specific rules for particular relationships. Privacy rules often take into account (1) cultural issues, (2) motivations, (3) contextual factors, (4) risk-benefit ratios, or (5) gender criteria (Petronio, 2000, 2002).

Each culture has expectations about the degree to which privacy is important and
appropriate; consequently, individuals develop ways to manage privacy boundaries based on these cultural expectations. For example, a privacy concern comparison between Americans and Canadians in a 1993 poll demonstrated that “47% of Americans in comparison to 35% of Canadians reported that they were very concerned with threats to their personal privacy” (Petronio, 2002, p. 40).

According to Petronio (2002), motivational factors include criteria of reciprocity, liking, attraction, loneliness, and ambiguity. For example, people may be more willing to disclose private information if they like one another. The degree of loneliness one feels and the degree of tolerance for ambiguity both function to regulate privacy access and privacy rule establishment. For example, people are less likely to open their privacy boundaries to others if they feel lonely, and people who have low tolerance for ambiguity may need more information and thus are more motivated to grant access through disclosure.

Contextual factors involve privacy rules people make in relation to different life events. Petronio (2002) suggested two life situations that may influence people’s criteria for privacy rule making: traumatic events and life circumstances. Traumatic events include unexpected life events that change individuals’ lives forever, such as experiencing sexual abuse. Petronio (2002) indicated that traumatic events “may trigger a different set of privacy rules to meet the demands of the situation” (p. 58). Moreover, people tend to use disclosures as one of the coping strategies under distressed situations (Carpenter, 1987, as cited in Petronio, 2002). Life circumstances involve less stressful situations than traumatic events. However, they often require individuals to change privacy rules to cope with the situations. Such life circumstances may involve the termination of significant relationships, becoming parents, or being disabled. For example, by focusing on people who have worked through the trauma of becoming disabled, Braithwaite (1991) examined how people with visible disabilities regulate their privacy rules when
interacting with people in their everyday circumstances.

The risk-benefit ratio are grounded in social exchange theory. Essentially, social exchange theory is based on the premise that individuals seek to maintain balance in their relationships. This balance is created by weighing the costs and benefits of the relationship in making decisions about how to interact with others (Homans, 1956, as cited in Petronio, 2002). In accordance with a social exchange theory perspective (Homans, 1956, as cited in Petronio, 2002), people disclose their thoughts, feelings, and actions and expect the recipient to disclose in return. Petronio (2002) also indicated that underlying the reciprocal action of disclosure may be the motivation to “increase rewards and decrease costs for disclosers” (p. 50). Thus, when an individual is creating a privacy rule, he or she must balance the risks of harming the relationship through self-disclosure with the potential benefits of enhancing the relationship through self-disclosure.

Lastly, privacy rules may be shaped by specific gender criteria. Petronio (2000, 2002) has maintained that gender is an important criterion to consider when attempting to understand how individuals manage privacy boundary access. Petronio (2002) pointed out that gender may influence the way people define the nature of their privacy, and men and women tend to use different sets of criteria to define the way private information is controlled as well as their ownership of private information. Caldwell and Peplau (1982) and Cline (1986) have determined that women and men tend to develop different privacy rules to manage their privacy boundaries. For instance, women tend to be more willing to reveal personal information than men. Petronio, Martin, and Littlefield (1984) examined how men and women disclose differently under the four self-disclosing prerequisites: setting, receiver, sender, and relationship characteristics. They found that women use sender and receiver personality characteristics as self-disclosing prerequisites more often than men. Specifically, women need to feel certain that the receiver will be trustworthy, respectful, sincere, discreet, a good listener, warm, liked, and open in return
(Petronio et al., 1984). They also suggested that women and men tend to process privacy boundary adjustment differently. Essentially, men and women consider different criteria in the creation of privacy boundaries. For example, Bate and Bowker (as cited in Martin, Anderson, & Mottet, 1999) stated that females tend to learn that self-disclosures can be a way of building and maintaining relationships, whereas males tend to learn that self-disclosing has potential risks to make them vulnerable, especially in competitive situations. Rubin and Shenker (1978) explored the correlation among gender, friendship, and self-disclosure. They suggested that the exchange of intimate self-disclosure on topics such as sex, expression of feelings, and interpersonal relationships played a more important role in women’s relationships than in men’s relationships, because men tend to engage in more task-oriented topics.

Koesten (2004) examined how sex influenced communication competence within same-sex friendships and romantic partnerships and indicated that men and women differ in their communication skills depending on the person with whom they communicate. Koesten (2004) found that women have greater abilities to self-disclose and to manage conflict with same-sex friends than with romantic partners, whereas men had greater facility with romantic partners than with same sex friends. Aforementioned researchers (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Cline, 1986; Koesten, 2004; Martin, Anderson, & Mottet, 1999; Petronio, 1984; Petronio, 2002; Rubin & Shenker, 1978) have indicated that men and women tend to have different disclosing criteria and disclose differently under different situations. However, researchers have not explored the influence of gender differences on stepparent-stepchild communication. In this study, I examine how stepfathers and stepmothers manage privacy boundaries differently when deciding whether to disclose to stepchildren.

Privacy Dilemmas

While individuals establish privacy rules for self-disclosure in order to maintain privacy
boundaries in a particular relationship, there are instances where the privacy rules they have established do not work well with third parties who might be affected by the privacy rules. For example, a parent may have a privacy rule about communicating with his or her child, but that privacy rule may not fit the expectation of a third party, the child’s stepparent. Stepparents are privacy shareholders and thus have a vested interest in how privacy boundaries between a spouse and a stepchild are negotiated. When shareholders violate rules by revealing private information outside of the privacy boundary, boundary turbulence occurs (Petronio, 2000, 2002). For example, a stepparent who tells the stepchild information that the parent was concealing from the child that violates the parent’s privacy rules and creates a privacy dilemma resulting in boundary turbulence.

Petronio (2002) identified privacy dilemmas as the predicaments caused by the accidental or purposeful violation of privacy rules. Petronio (2002) and Petronio and Caughlin (2006) have identified four types of privacy dilemmas in family contexts: confidant dilemmas, accidental dilemmas, illicit dilemmas, and interdependence dilemmas.

According to Petronio (2002) and Petronio and Caughlin (2006), confidant dilemmas arise when a confidant unexpectedly receives disclosure from one of the family members and struggles between the risk of revealing and the risk of not revealing to other members in the family. Accidental dilemmas occur when a person accidentally discovers another family member’s private information but both revealing and concealing the information would result in potential harm. Illicit dilemmas happen when a family member intentionally “snoops” for information about another family member and discovers something potentially harmful to that member or others; however, revealing the secret would cause later mistrust from that member or the rupture of the relationship. According to Petronio and Caughlin (2006), interdependence dilemmas are those “in which a family member must choose between what is best for the self
versus best for another family member or one’s relationship with another family member” (p. 46). These dilemmas are applicable within the context of first-married families.

Caughlin et al. (2000) argued that stepfamilies may have different privacy boundaries that tend to be more rigid than first-married families. However, researchers have not investigated other possible dilemmas that could occur in the stepfamily scenario. Therefore in this study, I explore the types of dilemmas that Petronio (2002) proposed and seek to determine whether additional privacy dilemmas emerge in stepfamily contexts by addressing the following research question:

RQ1: What are the privacy dilemmas that stepparents encounter when interacting with members in the stepfamily?

CPM in Families

Berardo (1998) suggested that family privacy serves an important function in families because “it furnishes self-protection from public view, grants a degree of latitude for interpreting social norms, affords a buffer zone to protect family from outside intrusions, and strengthens internal cohesion as the family is reinforced as a single unique entity” (p. 36). Moreover, managing privacy with people outside the family is crucial for family members (Berardo, 1998; Petronio & Caughlin, 2006; Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti, Caughlin, & Timmerman, 2001). Because of the complexity of family privacy, Petronio and Caughlin (2006) suggested that CPM could provide a comprehensive perspective with which to analyze family privacy and disclosure further.

Family is a context in which CPM is widely studied. Researchers (Durham, 2008; Greene & Serovich, 1993, 1996) have explored how significant life events influenced whether family members revealed or concealed private information from other family members or outsiders regarding these events. People are constantly dealing with privacy management, even during
interaction with other individuals with whom they share intimate relationships. The ways families deal with boundary management when confronting issues such as health, finances, relationships, or other important issues, indicate the importance of CPM in family communication (Caughlin & Petronio, 2006).

For example, Durham (2008) used CPM as the theoretical framework to explore how voluntarily child-free (VCF) couples made unsolicited disclosures to social network members about their family planning decisions. He determined that VCF couples use certain privacy rules when deciding when, where, and to whom they disclosed their decisions not to have children. The criteria VCF couples utilized reflected the general criteria suggested by Petronio (2002), which involved cultural, gendered, motivational, contextual, and risk-benefit criteria. Furthermore, VCF couples formed an external boundary through selecting confidants. The VCF couples reported they were more comfortable disclosing to like-minded close friends in order to minimize the risks associated with revealing their VCF status.

One aspect in family communication that has received much attention is the concept of privacy boundaries that separate a particular group or subgroup within the family or that separate a family as a unit from people outside of the family. Family members also control the boundaries that regulate the private information flow to other members within the family as well as those outside of the family. The collective use of privacy rules from family members form three permeability orientations for internal and external boundaries (Petronio, 2002). Families with high permeability orientations tend to disclose to internal family members or to individuals outside of the family openly. Families with moderate permeability are more judicious with choices about disclosures, whether within the family or outside the family. Families that are low in permeability orientation are highly restricted about disclosure, either with other family members or with outsiders.
Researchers (Morr, Dickson, Morrison, & Poole, 2007; Petronio, 2002) suggested that internal family privacy orientation is strongly related to family satisfaction. Families that are involved in more open communication reported more mutual trust and, consequently had higher satisfaction in family relationships. However, poor internal privacy boundary management may cause problems within the family. Miller (2005) found that poor boundary management by parents about their post-divorce dating would more likely result in children’s dissatisfaction in parent-child relationships. Children felt excluded if they perceived parents refraining from sharing their dating situations because they felt they had the right to know parents’ relationship statuses. Conversely, children became reluctant confidants when parents shared dating information their children did not expect to know (Petronio, 2002). In both situations, children were placed in awkward situations due to their parents’ poor privacy boundary management.

Minuchin (as cited in Caughlin et al., 2000) claimed that adequate privacy boundary between parents and children is required to create a functional family. Excessive, strong demand, or overly rigid privacy boundary management often results in lower family satisfaction. Overly permeable internal privacy boundaries can cause problems such as too much closeness between certain family members, which may result in stress for other family members. On the other hand, an inappropriate rigid interior boundary often resulted in disengagement or even family pathology.

By maintaining privacy rules, individuals’ consensus toward boundary management can help families construct cohesive family identities (Caughlin & Petronio, 2006). Boundary turbulence happens in families when members of the family violate the family’s privacy rules. Boundary turbulence can be particularly salient when family members confront privacy dilemmas. Privacy dilemmas represent the sense of “predicament” when family members confront boundary turbulence. Caughlin et al. (2000) argued that the challenge of negotiating
privacy dilemmas in the stepfamily context is unique and deserves additional consideration.

**CPM in Stepfamilies**

With the combination of two families with different backgrounds, newly formed stepfamilies usually have difficulties balancing the privacy management with different privacy rules brought to the family by members from different backgrounds (Caughlin & Petronio, 2006; Caughlin et al., 2000). Without shared family history and with the presence of role ambiguity, stepfamily members may create rigid privacy boundaries at the initial stages of familial relationships. Rigid privacy boundary rules may separate original family members from new family members (Caughlin et al., 2000; Caughlin & Petronio, 2006). As a result, stepfamilies may experience boundary turbulence more easily, and experience difficulties in trying to re-coordinate personal and family privacy boundaries to achieve balance in a new family identity (Caughlin & Petronio, 2006).

Caughlin and Petronio (2006) indicated that one way families acknowledge the status of a new family member is through disclosing family secrets. However, stepparents who are considered new family members often confront problems because they are excluded from internal privacy boundaries, especially from stepchildren’s privacy boundaries. The disengagement often results in aloofness between stepparents and stepchildren if the problem is not solved (Golish & Caughlin, 2002). Caughlin et al. (2000) examined the relationship between the number of intrafamily secrets and family satisfaction in first-married, single-parent, and blended family configurations. They found that the number of perceived intrafamily secrets is inversely related to family satisfaction for individuals, regardless of family configurations.

Even though Ganong et al. (1999) and Golish (2003) have indicated that one-on-one communication and self disclosure are useful affinity-seeking strategies for stepparents and stepchildren, Afifi (2003) found that stepfamilies often face dialectical tensions of loyalty-
disloyalty and concealing-revealing among parents, non-resident parents, and stepparents. Because of a lack of familiarity between stepparents and stepchildren, inadequate topics of self-disclosure may be detrimental to stepparent-stepchild relationships if the parties do not establish mutual trust (Afifi, 2003; Afifi et al., 2007; Golish, 2000; Golish & Caughlin, 2002; MacManus, 2007). For example, Afifi (2003) suggested that children may experience the feeling of “being caught” if parents or stepparents disclose unpleasant messages about the other party and, under these circumstances, conflicts are more likely to occur.

Inadequate self-disclosure from stepparents often results in topic avoidance for stepchildren (Golish, 2000; Golish & Caughlin, 2002). Furthermore, researchers (Golish, 2000; Golish & Caughlin, 2002) have found that adolescents in stepfamilies tend to engage in more topic avoidance than adolescents in first-marriage families. Golish and Caughlin (2002) examined adolescents’ and young adults’ use of topic avoidance with their mothers, fathers, stepmothers, and stepfathers. They determined that adolescents and young adults tend to create more rigid privacy boundaries with their stepparents than with their biological parents. Adolescents and young adults find that discussing private information with stepparents is relatively risky because of their lack of familiarity with the stepparents. Golish (2000) further examined adolescents’ and young adults’ topic avoidance within the stepfamily context and its association with relational satisfaction with their stepparents. He found that topic avoidance from adolescents and young adults negatively influenced their perceived closeness and relational satisfaction with their stepparents. As a result, self-disclosures are a double edged sword that have the potential to facilitate stepparent-stepchild relationships but also have the potential to be detrimental to the relationships if not used discreetly. However, researchers have neglected to examine how stepparents monitor their self-disclosing or concealing behaviors when interacting with stepchildren. I focused on the process of stepparents’ self-disclosing and concealing behavior
with their stepchildren using the following research question:

RQ2: What reasons do stepparents give as the basis for deciding whether to engage in self-disclosure with stepchildren?

As noted earlier, women and men tend to have different rules for regulating privacy boundaries. The gender of parents also has an effect on the amount of disclosure and the topics they disclose to their children. Horan et al. (2007) indicated that mothers tend to engage in more self-disclosure with children, especially daughters, and Afifi et al. (2007) suggested that women are more likely to disclose divorce process information to their children in order to vent and seek support. Nonetheless, no researchers have examined how gender differences influence stepparents’ privacy management when self-disclosing to stepchildren. Therefore, I explored the following research question:

RO3: How do stepparents’ reasons for revealing or concealing information from stepchildren differ based on their gender?
CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Participants

Thirty stepparents, including 15 stepmothers and 15 stepfathers, were recruited using snowball sampling. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) suggested that snowball sampling is a suitable method for recruiting participants for research about sensitive subjects. In order to participate, individuals had to have been a stepparent for more than one year. I asked stepparents who agreed to participate to refer other stepparents who met the research criteria. Twenty-three participants lived in Texas, two in Alabama, two in California, two in Nevada, and one in New York. The participants ranged in age from 33 to 75 years, with a mean age of 49.5 years. Twenty-three participants identified themselves as Caucasian, five as Asian, one as Hispanic, and one as African-American. The mean duration of participants’ stepfamilies was 12.3 years. The mean age of the participants’ stepchildren was 26.9 years; the stepchildren included 29 males and 27 females.

Data Collection

Participants participated primarily through in-depth telephone interviews; only one participant participated in a face-to-face interview with the researcher. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) suggested telephone interviews as a helpful method for soliciting private thoughts or experiences from participants because they never expect to meet or hear from the interviewer again. An informed consent script was read to the participants prior to the interviews. The participants granted permission to audio-record the interviews; participants’ confidentiality was assured. The average length of the interviews was 19.6 minutes and the data was later transcribed into 78 pages of double-spaced interview script. Participants’ names as well as other names were changed throughout the transcripts, and each participant was assigned a pseudonym in order to
Each participant provided general information about his or her family, including its composition, how long the stepfamily had been formed, as well as how he or she perceived the communicative interaction with his or her stepchildren. Interview questions focused on participants’ perceptions about their disclosing and concealing experiences with stepchildren. In particular, participants were asked to recall an experience when they decided to engage in self-disclosure with stepchildren as well as an experience when they decided to conceal information from them. Stepparents also were asked to recollect dilemmatic situations regarding privacy issues in their stepfamily households (see appendix for interview protocol). Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Based on Research Question 1, the coding procedure involved categorizing themes based on a priori theory for the four types of privacy dilemmas: confidant dilemma, accidental dilemmas, illicit privacy dilemmas, and interdependence dilemmas (Petronio, 2002). Moreover, exploratory coding was conducted in order to explore for the possibility that other dilemmas may emerge. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), a priori theory can serve as a supplementary validation for existing theories, while an exploratory method enables the researchers to investigate the possibility of emerging themes. For Research Question 2, an open coding procedure was utilized to develop categories from emergent themes, using the constant comparison method (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). The method involves a cyclical coding process that requires multiple reviews of the data, analysis, and interpretation. After several reviews of the transcripts, several overlapping themes emerged from the stepparents’ descriptions of the motivations for disclosing and concealing information from stepchildren. Emergent themes were further analyzed and placed into categories. Finally, I chose excerpts that best exemplified and
explained the results. The constant comparison method was also utilized to answer Research Question 3. In order to explore how gender differences influence stepparents’ reasons for disclosing and concealing information from stepchildren, the scripts of stepfathers and stepmothers were compared and contrasted. Salient distinctions between stepfathers and stepmothers under the categories of motivations for revealing and concealing information from stepchildren were noted and described.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

My purpose in this study was to identify how communication privacy management (CPM) functions in the stepfamily context through the examination of privacy dilemmas, how stepparents monitor their own self-disclosure to stepchildren, as well as how a stepparent’s gender influences his or her self-disclosure behaviors.

Privacy Dilemmas in Stepfamilies

RQ 1 examined what are the privacy dilemmas stepparents encounter when interacting with members in the stepfamily. Petronio (2002) suggested that boundary turbulence can be particularly salient when family members confront privacy dilemmas. Privacy dilemmas represent the sense of “predicament” when family members confront boundary turbulence. Petronio (2002) identified four types of privacy dilemmas: confidant dilemmas, accidental dilemmas, illicit family privacy dilemmas, and interdependence dilemmas. In this study, three of the four dilemmas emerged as salient dilemmas stepparents encountered: confidant dilemmas, accidental dilemmas, and interdependence dilemmas. No illicit family privacy dilemmas were found. Only 12 of the 30 participants reported interactions that could be coded as dilemmas. Two participants reported interactions that were confidant dilemmas, three participants reported accidental dilemmas, and four participants reported interdependence dilemmas. In addition, three participants indicated that they had experienced privacy dilemmas; however they did not reveal specific information about the dilemmas.

Confidant Dilemmas

Only two of the 12 participants who experienced dilemmas reported confidant dilemmas with their stepchildren. According to Petronio (2002), confidant dilemmas arise when an individual unexpectedly receives disclosure from another family member and receives
information that casts him or her as a confidant. As a confidant, this individual struggles between the risk of revealing and the risk of not revealing the information to other members in the family. For example, Sarah reported a feeling of struggle when her stepdaughter revealed that she got a tattoo:

She told me first that she had a tattoo because she knows it would make her dad mad, and I knew her sisters knew, and she tried the idea out on me. She wanted to know how he’d feel about it, so she asked me. I’m not a tattoo person but I’m just wanted Jenny to feel that I’m on her team. I think that I might be a little bit offended because I was thinking that [her dad and her grandparents] would be hard on her you know? And I know that they are really really against tattoos. So it’s kinda tricky.

The unexpected information from her stepdaughter created a dilemma for Sarah. She had to choose between conforming to family and personal values and the desire to be perceived as supportive by her stepdaughter by concealing the information from other family members.

Another participant, Lisa, reported a similar experience when she received unsolicited information about her stepdaughter’s sexual identity:

This one daughter called me and she’s just complaining about you know, she wants to talk to her dad, she wants to tell him something but she doesn’t want to make him mad. And she’s telling [me that] she wants to tell him that she’s gay. I’m like, why do you need to tell me? [She replied], I don’t. This is some[thing] I don’t wanna hear. I’m not your mother, I don’t wanna hear it. He’s not gonna kill her. But they’re just so fearful. She finally told me and so we sat her down. He is excellent with people. His whole life revolves around children at work. So you know, she has nothing to worry about.

Lisa experienced a confident dilemma when her stepdaughter unexpectedly revealed to her that she was gay. In pointing out that she is not the biological mother of her stepdaughter, Lisa expressed her unwillingness to share the “burden” with her stepdaughter by remaining silent. At the same time, however, Lisa felt that as a stepmother she had a responsibility to facilitate communication between the stepdaughter and her father.

The participants reported that unexpected self-disclosures from stepchildren sometimes made them “reluctant confidants” (McBride & Bergen, 2008). These unexpected disclosures of private information put them in dilemmatic situations that forced them to struggle between the
risk of revealing or concealing information from other members in the family.

Accidental Dilemmas

Another dilemma among participants’ experience was accidental dilemmas. Three of the 12 participants who reported dilemmas experienced accidental dilemmas. Accidental dilemmas occur when a person accidentally finds out another family member’s private information but both revealing and concealing the information would result in potential harm (Petronio, 2002). Some participants reported experiencing situations when they accidentally discovered the “secrets” of their stepchildren. For example, Jessica described an experience of an accidental dilemma when she discovered that one of her stepchildren had skipped school:

There was one time, I found out that one of them skipped school. He [stepson] didn’t go to school and I didn’t say anything to his father because I didn’t want to get him in trouble. I knew he didn’t do it all the time, it was just one time. So I decided not to say anything [to his father]

Jessica had to decide the decisions whether to report her stepson’s wrongdoing to his father after she accidentally found out that her stepson did not attend school. Jessica felt that she had the responsibility to discipline her stepson; however, she hesitated because she did not want her stepson to be punished by his father. In the end, the motivation to protect her stepson from being punished out-weighed her perceived responsibility to discipline him. Jessica reported a sense of struggle between revealing and concealing the information she discovered to her spouse. Mandy also described a similar dilemmatic feeling when she found out that her stepdaughter took her young son out without permission from either Mandy or her husband. Mandy indicated that she came home unexpectedly one day and discovered her stepdaughter’s misbehavior, which her stepdaughter might have successfully hidden from them if Mandy had not come home early. Mandy described the situation:

She [stepdaughter] was left here with my son and then she took off with my son, who was only seven or eight. And I couldn’t find them for a while. [But] he [husband] was never told at that time about what’s going on [because] I was afraid of how he might react to what was
going on. Mandy was anxious about not being able to find her son after she accidentally found out that her stepdaughter took him away without permission; however, she was hesitant about reporting the incident to her husband because at the same time, she wanted to protect her stepdaughter from being punished by her father.

Both examples of accidental dilemma manifest the stepparents’ challenge in managing stepparent-stepchild relationships. Without a biological bond with their stepchildren, as well as the role ambiguity inherent in their stepparent roles (Pacey, 2005), stepparents were often caught between their perceived need to “side with the stepchildren” in order to maintain stepparent-stepchild relationship and their perceived responsibility to discipline them.

Moreover, Petronio (2002), privacy dilemmas are not always mutually exclusive. Due to the complexity of privacy boundary management inherent in personal interactions, individuals may experience overlapping privacy dilemmas in a single incidence. The result of the study indicated that some participants may experience two types of privacy dilemma in the single incidence they reported. For example, at first, Eva experienced an accidental dilemma when she discovered a marijuana pipe in her stepson’s room; however the dilemma further transformed to an interdependence dilemma when Eva started to weigh between risks and benefits of confronting her stepson about what she has found. Eva described her experience:

I found a marijuana pipe in my stepson’s room. I talked to my husband about it. I couldn’t decide whether or not [it] needed to [be] addressed with him or that we needed just to keep to ourselves and monitor it. [Was it] really his friends or his sister’s or who it really belong[ed] to.

Eva expressed her struggle between confronting her stepson for the purpose of educating him and remaining silent for fear that she would wrong her stepson if the pipe did not actually belong to him. Eva also indicated that the delicate relationship between stepparents and stepchildren made such situations even more difficult:
I think it’s different when it’s your children, when they feel some connection to you through nature, a biological connection. Or when they don’t have another mom. In this case, their mom is six blocks away from us. They don’t see me as a mom, kind of, but not really, because their mom is six blocks away. So I think, [that this relationship is] definitely difficult.

Eva first experienced an accidental dilemma when she unexpectedly discovered a marijuana pipe in her stepson’s room; however the dilemma has transformed into an interdependence dilemma because Eva was trying to balance between her need to disclose (confront with her stepson about the pipe) and risks and benefits that other family members may experience. Eva was afraid that the confrontation would bring negative influence on the relationship because she was not sure whether she was perceived by his stepson as having the right to discipline him; however at the same time, she was concerned that her stepson would not receive proper guidance if she decided not to voice her concern to him. The accidental dilemma Eva experienced has turned into an interdependence dilemma because Eva was at the same time weighing between her risk (sabotaging the relationship by confronting with her stepson) and her son’s benefit (receiving guidance). Following are more examples of interdependence dilemma reported by other participants who also experienced the dilemma of weighing the risks and benefits based on their disclosure.

Interdependence Dilemmas

The final dilemma participants described were interdependence dilemmas. Four of the 12 participants who reported dilemmas experienced interdependence dilemmas. Interdependence dilemmas are concerned with the desire to balance between the individual’s need to disclose and risks and benefits that other family members may experience based on the individual’s disclosure. According to Petronio and Caughlin (2006), the interdependent nature of families fosters a concern for the influence of disclosure on other family members. Thus, individuals must consider their own needs for disclosure as well as the potential consequences to other family members.
when weighing the risks and benefits of disclosing particular information. For example, Grace was hesitant to express her concern about her stepchildren’s consumer behavior, because she was afraid that directly addressing the problem would have a negative influence on her relationship with her stepchildren. She described her dilemmatic feelings about the situation:

I understand they’re [stepchildren] still young, they don’t have children. They party a little bit, they travel a little bit, might use credit cards. I have my opinion about all those things, and my feelings brought [me to] voice them to [their] dad and say that ‘I hope they don’t run out credit cards and hope they’re making good choices’ [Because] they seem[ed] so level headed. I hope they keep their head alright, so they don’t get in credit card debt or anything.

Instead of voicing her concern directly to her stepchildren, Grace turned to her husband. She was afraid that a direct comment to her stepchildren would be interpreted as disapproval of her stepchildren’s lifestyle. Nevertheless, Grace was worried about their irresponsible consumer behaviors. Grace expressed a dilemma of choosing between the benefit of maintaining good relationship with her stepchildren and the risk of not addressing her stepchildren’s irresponsible consumer behaviors.

Alex reported a similar experience when his discussed his desire to share his religious perspectives with his stepchildren:

We try to live godly lives, and I try to be careful about how I speak to the [step]children about living a clean, godly, conservative type of life. But I don’t want to tell them too much because it might push them away and make them act rebellious toward what I may be saying.

Alex also expressed his concern that forcing his lifestyle on his stepchildren would have a negative influence on his relationship with them but, at the same time, he expressed a desire for his stepchildren to have the benefits of a better life. As a result, Alex experienced a tension between what is best for him (maintaining good relationship with his stepchildren) and what he perceived to be most beneficial for the stepchildren (being informed about a better way to live their lives).
Another example from Jason also manifested the interdependence dilemma when deciding whether to tell his stepson that the family was considering a move away from his stepson’s biological father:

I had an opportunity to move back to Forth Worth. I discussed just with my wife but I would not discuss with a lot of other people especially [my stepson]. I didn’t want to get him upset because [if we decided to move], he’s not able to go and see his dad as often. I want[ed] the right thing for us to do, I didn’t want to worry him about it. We didn’t want to upset anybody.

Jason was experiencing the dilemma about whether to inform his stepson about the possibility of moving to another place. Initially, while Jason and his wife were trying to decide whether to move, Jason decided to keep the information from his stepson in an attempt to protect his stepson from worrying about the situation until a final decision was made. Moreover, the concealment of the information also constituted a benefit for Jason because he did not want to be the target of resentment. By suggesting that “I didn’t want to upset anybody,” Jason expressed his worry about being resented by his stepson or others if he had delivered the bad news. Nevertheless, by concealing the information, Jason precluded his stepson from participating in a family decision, which could be altered if the stepson’s opinion was taken into account. As a result, Jason had to weigh the benefit to himself (concealing the information so he would not worry or upset his stepson or others) and the benefit to his stepson (being informed about the possibility of moving and having the chance to voice his opinion) before making the decision whether to tell his stepson about their possibility of moving to another place.

Another participant, Carol, whose stepchildren and children were away from home, expressed a similar experience when considering whether to inform her stepchildren and her biological children about the information that her husband was recently diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease.

We found out that Edison had Parkinson’s disease. We haven’t decided whether to tell the kids or not. [Because] it’s going to affect how he interacts with them as well as how they
have to interact with him. Parkinson’s disease changes you. You can’t step and walk out absolutely normally. And that’s going to affect him and them and every time that we’re around him. You just have to be prepared for what may come next.

Carol was experiencing the dilemmas of whether to tell her stepchildren and biological children about her husbands’ recent diagnosis of Parkinson’s disease, because she thought her stepchildren and biological children were not ready to handle such a big life transition in the family. Moreover, by concealing the information, Carol bought herself more time to adjust to life with her ill husband before handling problems resulting from the interaction between her (step)children and their (step)father. However, on the other hand, Carol was aware that the sooner her (step)children were informed of their (step)father’s condition, the better they would be prepared when interacting with him. Moreover, Carol also recognized her (step)children’s right to know about such a major family situation because they were part of the family. She suggested “[I should tell them] so it won’t be a surprise to them, a shock to them, and they didn’t come over one day and [find out that] dad couldn’t walk.” Carol was caught between the dilemma of weighing a personal benefit (concealing the information so she could better adjust to the changes resulting from her husband’s illness first) with her (step)children’s benefit (being informed of the situation so that they can be better prepared for it and also the right to be included in the loop of family situation) when pondering whether to disclose her husband’s disease.

Motivation of Disclosure and Concealment

With RQ2, I examined the reasons stepparents give for deciding whether or not to engage in self-disclosure with stepchildren. According to Petronio (2002), individuals often utilize their own privacy rules to decide whether and when to reveal private information. My analysis of the data revealed four reasons stepparents provided as the basis for deciding whether to reveal or conceal private information from stepchildren: (a) the desire to establish good relationships with
stepchildren, (b) the desire to view their stepchildren as their own children, (c) the desire to help stepchildren handle situations resulting from the divorce, and (d) view stepchildren as friends or outsiders.

Establishing Good Relationships

Stepparents in the study disclosed and concealed information from the stepchildren in order to establish or maintain good stepparent-stepchild relationships. In the present study, 11 participants reported sharing private information with stepchildren as a way to bond with them. Derlega et al. (1993) indicated that self-disclosure facilitates relationship development. For example, Ruth suggested that she tried to bond with her stepchildren by sharing information about her former relationship with her ex-husband:

I think at first I thought it [knowing about Ruth’s relationship with her ex-husband] would help them to understand more about how I divorced. My relationship with their father being a better relationship. So I think I thought I was trying to bond with them by telling them, where I was [in my life] and what made me decide to choose their father.

Ganong et al. (1999) concluded that stepchildren perceived the sharing of personal history by stepparents as an effective affinity-seeking strategy. By sharing the history of her previous marriage, Ruth hoped to help her stepchildren understand her previous and current situation and to establish a close relationship with them. Another participant, John, indicated that sharing private information with his stepchild indicated a family value of open communication. He also expressed the hope that this strategy would help him and his wife create a safe environment for his stepson to share information, “We want to make sure that Scott can come to us with anything. We’re very open and so if he has a problem, either good or bad, we want to make sure that we communicate very well with him.” Golish (2003) found that openness in stepfamily communication was crucial to facilitating strong stepparent-stepchild relationships. By engaging in self-disclosure with his stepson, John hoped to create an open communication in the sense of wanting to include his stepson as part of the family.
In addition, some stepparents reported that engaging in self-disclosure was beneficial in establishing mutual trust with their stepchildren. Sharon described her experience in disclosing frustrations toward her husband with her stepdaughter. She claimed that such disclosures positively influenced their relationship because “in return, she’ll share things with me about her mother and we both keep each other’s information very confidential. We’re very respectful for each other.” Jason also expressed how he felt after sharing his childhood experiences with his stepson:

I think anytime you share [personal information] with somebody, it brings your relationship closer. And I think it enables the other person to potentially share more things with you than they would before, because you take that first step. I felt like [my stepson] is more willing to come to me when he has trouble or whatever.

Jason expressed the hope that his willingness to share private information with his stepson not only would bring them closer but would encourage his stepson to open up whenever he felt the need to do so. Stepparents suggested that their willingness to share private information with stepchildren sometimes motivated their stepchildren to engage in reciprocal disclosures. For example, Grace expressed her experiences of having self-disclosure to her stepdaughter because “It’s always positive because in turns she’ll share things with me and we both are keeping each other’s information very confidential. We’re very respectful for each other” Derlega et al. (1993) and Derlega et al. (2008) have concluded that self-disclosure “increases intimacy or closeness with the other person and encourages reciprocity” (Derlega et al, 2008, p. 120). Through sharing private information with stepchildren, some stepparents reported receiving reciprocal disclosure from stepchildren that created a sense of mutual trust and closeness.

Although some participants willingly disclosed private information to their children, 2 participants reported concealing private information from their stepchildren in order to maintain good relationships with their stepchildren. Stepparents concealed information that they perceived the information would potentially pressure the stepchildren or would be undesired by the
stepchildren. For example, stepparents perceived certain topics or information as a risk for sabotaging their relationships if revealed to the stepchildren. One of the participants, Grace, expressed her decision not to force her stepdaughter and her husband to go to church even though the issue of religion was important to her:

I hope they can have the spiritual experience I have in my life but I don’t talk to her about that, we wait for the door to open. That’s one subject I won’t force on her. I do discuss that [with my husband], I think about it, but I don’t discuss it with her. I let her open the door.

Grace reported that she was very careful in handling the relationship with her stepdaughter in terms of religion and spirituality. She was conscious that such expectations might jeopardize their relationship. Grace’s reluctance to discuss her personal beliefs with her stepdaughter stemmed from the desire to maintain a positive relationship with her stepdaughter:

People don’t want to be forced, they want to make that decision on their own. I try to avoid anything that’s going to cause anything negative between us. I wouldn’t [do the same] with my own children. My own children love me unconditionally because I’m their mother. But she [her stepdaughter] has a mother and she could choose not to have a relationship with me. So I’m very careful not to jeopardize the trust we have now, very careful.

Grace also expressed that because she lacked the biological bond, she had to be cautious and discreet when handling the relationship with her stepdaughter. She felt that by revealing her expectations regarding spirituality, she might risk breaking their mutual trust and negatively influence their future relationship. Grace claimed that by concealing her intimate spiritual experiences, she would not be perceived as forcing her personal beliefs on her stepdaughter and could avoid the risks of jeopardizing their relationship.

Another participant, Alex, also reported concealing issues between him and his present wife (stepchildren’s biological mother) in order to avoid a negative impact on the stepparent-stepchild relationships. Having grown up in a stepfamily, Alex experienced that receiving unsolicited information about problems between his parent and the spouse had negatively influence the stepparent-stepchild relationship. As a result, Alex tried to avoid repeating that
history with his stepchildren. He described why he decided to conceal problems between him and his wife from his stepchildren:

I always try to be positive about influencing them to have a healthy relationship between them [stepchildren] and myself. I think it’s very important. I was actually a stepchild myself from the time I was very young, so I see some of the things I went through and try to make it as easily as I can for their lives.

Based on his former experience as a stepchild, Alex perceived that receiving unwanted information about a stepparent and his or her spouse had negative influences on stepparent-stepchild relationships. By learning from past experience, Alex made an effort to not make the same mistakes his stepparent made during his childhood experiences. As a result, Alex perceived that he achieved a positive stepparent-stepchild relationship by concealing private information from his stepchildren. Participants who engaged in disclosure or concealment proposed similar motives to establish and maintain good relationships with their stepchildren.

Stepchildren as Own Children

Perceiving stepchildren the same as biological children was a factor in determining whether to disclose or conceal information between stepparent-stepchild relationships. Stepparents’ intentions to reveal or conceal private information were based on accepting their stepchildren as biological children or viewing them as outsiders. Six stepparents claimed they disclose certain information because they treated stepchildren as their biological children. They discussed the same topics or disclosed background stories to their stepchildren as they would with their biological children. The motivations for stepparents revealing certain information with stepchildren often involved educational purposes or revealing stepparents’ expectations for their stepchildren. George described his reason for disclosing private information to his stepson:

Sometimes I talk to him [stepson] about the spiritual things and how important it is to have God in your life, and to really make [God] an important part of your life. How you make your own decisions and how you live your life. Sometimes we talk about how to improve
himself and to do things that would benefit him in the future like school or [how to] apply [a school], because he’s like my own son.

Stepparents suggested that the purpose of self-disclosure involved perceiving stepchildren as biological children and wanting stepchildren to experience or learn from their personal experiences or beliefs. Scott, likewise, noted that he shared information about his relationship with his biological daughters in order to show his stepdaughter that she is just like his own daughter: “I want her [stepdaughter] to know more about me and how’s my life [like] with my biological daughters. And I have the same expectation for her as I have for my daughters.” Stepparents felt that they have a responsibility to disclose for the purpose of educating their stepchildren.

Another motivation for disclosure is because stepparents perceived intimate information as inevitable or necessary. Stepparents claimed that engaging in self-disclosure is what some parents would normally discuss or share with their biological children. By making such disclosures, stepparents hoped to achieve educational purpose and demonstrate the equal concern or love that they have for their stepchildren and their biological children. For example, Dale reported sharing his past experience with his stepson in order to educate him just as he educated his biological children:

I told him many times about [how to manage his money] and how things were different when I was a child. How I was more responsible for financial things than he is today, my other kids are today. I felt like he needed to have more responsibility in that area as I did when I was a child. Since we don’t have a money tree in the backyard, he needs to be responsible with that.

Interestingly, 6 stepparents decided not to disclose intimate information to their stepchildren for the same reasons that they would not disclose that information to their biological children. Some participants claimed they chose not to disclose things of an adult nature that were inappropriate or unnecessary for either stepchildren or biological children to know. Brent shared his opinion about information he chose to keep from his two stepdaughters:
Honestly, they are the same information your parents [are] keeping from you. You know, you don’t need to know what your mother and father are doing all the time. And that’s pretty much it. There’s not much other information we keep from them [stepchildren], we don’t let them know the family members are healthy or not, whether we’re sick, the pets died or what’s going on in our lives. I mean it’s just the same information your parents don’t share with you, and we don’t share with them because it’s inappropriate.

Similarly, Jason suggested no difference in terms of keeping information from his stepson or his own child:

There’s definitely things that I have not disclose, just like I would’ve [concealed from my stepson] if he were my child. There’s certain thing you don’t disclose [such as] someone’s health within the family, [who] is taking a bad turn and potentially might pass away. We don’t [tell him] things [of] that nature.

Both of the participants suggested that they do not distinguish stepchildren from their own children and thus excluded them from the information or topics they did not share with their biological children. Some stepparents choose to disclose or conceal information because they perceived stepchildren no differently than their biological children. They disclose to convey the expectations they have for their own children, or to fulfill parents’ responsibilities to educate their children. Participants claimed that by concealing private information from stepchildren and biological children, stepparents would treated every child equally and showed their stepchildren the same love they demonstrated toward their biological children. On the other hand, some stepparents also concealed the information for the same reasons they concealed the information from biological children. Participants viewed their stepchildren no differently than their biological children and thus did not disclose information that they determined as only appropriate for adults.

Assisting Stepchildren with Situations Resulting From Divorce

Divorce can be a major issue affecting stepparent-stepchild relationships. Stepparents sometimes disclose or conceal certain information from stepchildren in order to help them cope with tough times regarding issues resulting from divorce. Three stepparents in the present study
reported revealing information they perceive as helpful to stepchildren in adjusting to situations in the stepfamily or about the divorce of their biological parents. Seven stepparents reported concealing information about the stepchildren’s non-resident parent, the divorce process, or situations among themselves and the stepchildren’s biological parents, in order to protect stepchildren from related negativity.

Stepparents disclose stories or information about their former spouses and their similar experiences of being stepchildren in an attempt to help stepchildren understand situations in the stepfamily or about the divorce. For example, Ruth shared an experience of telling her stepchildren about her relationship with her ex-husband:

I guess early on [in] our relationship; I told them [stepchildren] something about my former relationship with my ex-husband and the decline of our relationship. I mean it helped them to understand why I divorced. I was really hoping that maybe they’ll be able to see what kind of circumstances their dad had gone through with their mother. I’m not really sure it helped it all, but at that time I thought it would.

By sharing information about the relationship with her ex-husband, and how they separated, Ruth expressed an attempt to help her stepchildren understand the divorce of their parents. In another instance a stepparent shared her personal experiences as a stepchild with her stepchildren for the purpose of assisting her stepchildren in understanding their parents’ divorce. Nancy reported making the same effort by sharing her experiences of becoming a stepchild at the same age as her stepdaughter:

My parents were divorced when I was 6, the same age [when my stepdaughter’s parents were divorced]. Very similar consequences, both sides [parents] are stupid sometimes. In a way, it was bad for me to have to go through that with my parents, but on the other hand it’s good because [so] that I can help her with the experience. Her parents were divorced when she was quite young, and unfortunately it wasn’t a very good divorce. A lot tug in the world of a child. A lot of things were done to the child that was not good. So, I hoped it helped because she knows I’ve been through the same thing.

By disclosing former life experiences or personal experiences, stepparents attempted to help their stepchildren through tough times and to understand their parents’ divorce.
Other stepparents chose to conceal information about stepchildren’s non-resident parents, the process of the divorce, or situations among stepparents and stepchildren’s biological parents in order to protect the stepchildren from negativity. For example, Ruth described her decision not to tell her stepchildren about issues regarding their biological mother and the family:

I guess there has been a lot [of] tension between their mother, their dad and me over the last five years. The mother’s custody battles that kind of thing. And I concealed this information from them in quite a few occasions because I didn’t think it was something beneficial for them to know. Their mother always tried to get in the middle but I thought it was important not to use them [stepchildren] as pawn.

Ruth expressed her reluctance to disclose any information regarding the divorce or use her stepchildren as pawns in unpleasant situations. Stepparents concealed such information to make sure that stepchildren remained outsiders to the conflict and to prevent stepchildren from the possible negativity or harm from the divorce. Furthermore, some stepparents indicated that they avoided making negative comments about the stepchildren’s non-resident parents for fear of upsetting the stepchildren or jeopardizing their relationship with the stepchildren. Nancy described similar sentiments and claimed that she does not make negative comments about her stepdaughter’s biological mother:

They [stepdaughter’s parents] were divorced for a reason, so if it has something to do with the relationship between her mother and her father; her mother’s behavior that is wrong, then I don’t say anything, even though I think she’ll find out later. [When] my parents were divorced, everybody told me things about my mother that was negative, even though it was true, it still hurts my feelings. I don’t want her to have that relationship with her mother.

Stepparents also suggested that they do not make negative comments about the non-resident parent to avoid being judgmental. Scott mentioned his stepdaughter’s biological father had failed to fulfill his responsibility of being a man and a father. However he never brought it up in front of his stepdaughter because he did not want to impose his opinion on his stepdaughter. Likewise, John suggested the unfairness of instilling negative images about the non-resident parent in his stepson, no matter how wrong his father had been:
We don’t talk about his [stepson’s] father. His father hasn’t been in part of his life, pretty much his whole life. His dad is a very negative influence. His dad is doing a lot of bad things. So we never talk bad about his dad, ever, because we don’t want any negativity. And that’s not fair [to judge him] while he [biological father] is not here to defend. We don’t want to talk any negativity in front of Sean.

Stepparents reported similar experiences with stepchildren; specifically, they generally avoided talking negatively about non-resident parents in order to help stepchildren understand situations between their parents and to protect them from the negativity regarding the divorce. Researchers (Afifi, 2003; Afifi et al., 2007; Golish, 2003) have confirmed that revealing unpleasant information about the divorce, especially about stepchildren’s biological parents, negatively influence stepchildren’s well-being or result in stepchildren’s topic avoidance behavior. Afifi (2003) also suggested that “creating rules for appropriate disclosures about the other parent or stepfamily” (p.745) is crucial in preventing negative influences on stepchildren. Results showed that stepparents avoided negativity with stepchildren regarding the divorce and their non-resident parents. Participants agreed that keeping stepchildren from being involved in divorce conflicts is crucial for the stepchildren and the stepfamily’s well-being.

Stepchildren as Friends or Outsiders

Stepparents’ perceptions of their relationship with stepchildren also affected their decisions to disclose or conceal information from their stepchildren. Two stepparents in the current study reported disclosing private information in order to seek advice or support from their stepchildren. Some participants viewed their stepchildren as a friend in the family, a third party from whom they can seek advice and support. Lisa stated that she chose to share her biological daughter’s illness with her stepdaughter because her husband would not listen to her:

I’ve told one of them [stepdaughters] something very private [even] my husband doesn’t know. [It’s] about my own child. When my daughter was in school in Denton, she swore that she had ADHD. [The disease] hurt her school work. I told [one of] the stepdaughters about this because when I told my husband my daughter was going to be tested, he thought it was stupid. So when we got her test result back, he refused to read them, he refused to put anything on this paper. So I wanted to tell the stepdaughter, you know, this is what your
dad’s doing, he doesn’t believe in any of this. I was not asking for pity you know, I just needed to tell someone.

During the interview, Lisa mentioned the friendship she had developed with her stepdaughter as drawing them closer together; she indicated they chatted constantly: “And I’m not kidding you, she talks like you and your girlfriends’ talk.” Lisa turned to her stepdaughter, in whom she believed she could confide as a friend to gain the support she could not get from her husband. Joyce also suggested such a relationship with her stepdaughters. “I feel better talking to them [stepdaughters] like a friend than I do like a parent.” Another participant, Grace, perceived her stepdaughter as more than a family member from whom she could seek advice on how to get along with her biological children:

I’ve talked to her [stepdaughter] about my older children who are in college. Because she [stepdaughter] is 3 years older then them, so she can help me understand what challenges they’re facing and how they looked at my guidance. She helps me to understand where to draw a line, you know, in nurturing them, and giving them freedom and responsibility.

By sharing problems about her biological children, Grace stated that she gained helpful advice from her stepdaughter on how to discipline her biological children. She also mentioned that it was helpful sometimes to have her stepdaughter as a positive influence on her biological children:

I told her [stepdaughter] about my children, and how I relate to them. I know that she keeps [the conversation] confidential. But when she is with them, she can show them the way and guide them. It’s just things I want them to know and she [helps me] understand the young people. She can do it in a more appropriate way on their age level.

Stepparents sometimes choose to disclose because they feel that stepchildren are not only family members but also friends who can provide support and helpful suggestions for their problems.

On the other hand, 2 participants reported keeping a rigid privacy boundary that excludes stepchildren from self-disclosure because the stepparents did not feel connected to their stepchildren or simply did not perceive them as family members. Emily expressed her distance from her stepdaughter and indicated that she did not share personal information liberally: “there are many things I don’t want her to know because we’re just not really that close.” Another
participant, Jessica, claimed to have rigid privacy boundaries with her stepchildren because she did not think that she could trust them with her private information. She described concealing her financial status from the stepchildren because one of her stepchildren has a history of theft:

The girl [stepdaughter] has stolen money from her parents before. So I actually lock my bedroom door because I don’t think she would stay out of it. I just don’t want them to feel like I have a lot of money so I should be buying them things.

Negative perceptions of stepchildren was one of the factors affecting stepparents’ decisions not to reveal private information to their stepchildren. Jessica’s knowledge and opinion of her stepchild, who she claimed was a thief, discouraged her from developing a closer relationship with her stepchild and revealing private information to her.

Caughlin et al. (2000) indicated that without shared family history and with the presence of role ambiguity, stepfamily members may create more rigid privacy boundaries than members in first-marriage families. Stepparents tend to maintain a rigid privacy boundary if they do not feel they can develop a strong relationship with their stepchildren. As a result, stepchildren become outsiders rather than family, because stepparents do not feel intimate with their stepchildren or perceive them as trustworthy enough to be included within their privacy boundaries.

Stepparents may contemplate whether to include or to exclude stepchildren from their privacy boundaries based on how they perceive their stepchildren. Stepparents tend to disclose in order to seek advice and support if they perceive stepchildren as friends or family members who are capable of helping them. However, stepparents may also maintain a rigid privacy boundary if they perceive stepchildren more as outsiders than as members of the family.

Stepparent Gender Differences in Disclosing and Concealing

RQ3 explored stepparents’ reasons for revealing or concealing information from stepchildren based on gender. Petronio (2002) proposed gender as one of the important criteria with “the potential to influence the way men and women define the nature of their privacy” when
individuals develop privacy rules (p. 42). Petronio (2002) also suggested that men and women
tend to develop dissimilar rules when regulating privacy boundaries because “they see revealing
and concealing from different vantage points” (p. 42). Results indicated that stepmothers and
stepfathers have different reasons for disclosing or concealing private information from
stepchildren. Stepmothers tend to disclose for the purpose of helping stepchildren understand
situations in the family or seeking support and advice from stepchildren. Stepfathers disclosed
information mainly for the purpose of educating or guiding stepchildren and were more likely to
refer to their spouses as people who usually have personal talks with their children. As for
concealment, stepmothers often concealed information from stepchildren in order to protect them.
Stepfathers, on the other hand, are more likely to report they do not conceal anything from their
stepchildren, and are more likely to refer to the term conceal as “hide.”

Stepmothers

In the present study, three stepmothers reported disclosing private information to their
stepchildren for the purpose of helping them understand situations in the family or helping them
through difficult situations resulting from the divorce; no stepfather reported disclosing under
such motivation. Moreover, only stepmothers (3 out of 15) reported disclosing in order to seek
support from stepchildren.

Schmeckle (2007) indicated that stepmothers are often perceived as “kinkeepers” by
stepchildren. They are more likely to provide support, give nurture and affection, and discuss
their emotional and personal lives with stepchildren. Stepmothers also often take the lead in
facilitating contact and inclusion of stepchildren in family events. In the present study,
stepmothers were more likely to adopt a nurturing role and to engage in self-disclosure with
stepchildren than stepfathers in order to help them through difficult circumstances in the family
or with issues related to divorce. For example, Nancy remembered sharing her childhood
experience with her stepdaughter to help her understand situations in the family:

One time there was an issue in the family; a whole bunch [of] stuff happened. And she [stepdaughter] was besetting us. She was basically gone and it was just not a very good situation. And so she just wanted to hide and not talk to people. Her father didn’t want to talk to her [or] didn’t even know how to talk to her. So I finally sat down and explained to her the entire situation. Because I’ve gone through the same thing [like she was going through]- parents divorced [and] you have to move in with somebody else. So it was because I didn’t feel her father did an adequate job of explaining the situation [to her].

In fulfilling the role of mother in the household, Nancy felt responsible to take care of her stepdaughter when she felt the child’s father did not do an “adequate job.” Nancy filled the role of her stepdaughter’s mother and provided nurture and comfort by having intimate communication with her. Ruth suggested that she helped her stepchild clarify the situation with regard to her parents’ divorce by having a conversation with her about the separation with her ex-husband: “I mean it helped them to understand why I divorced. I was really hoping that maybe they’ll be able to see what kind of circumstances their dad had gone through with their mother.” Grace also mentioned a similar experience with her stepdaughter: “Sometimes I talk to her, she had a similar childhood that I had, so I’ll share something about that, to help her to know that I understand what she’s going through because I’ve gone through the same thing.”

In comparison with stepfathers, stepmothers were more self-motivated to engage in private conversations with their stepchildren in order to nurture and support. Derlega et al. (1993) and Petronio (2002) have indicated that gender role expectations that require women to be more comforting and nurturing tend to increase self-disclosure by women. Interestingly, several stepfathers also mentioned gender role expectations for women when interacting with their children. For example, Dennis claimed that “Things we don’t tell is the things he [stepson] shouldn’t know. It’s adult business. But I think his mom would tell him these things.” Another participant, Alex, also commented similarly concerning his self-disclosure experience with his stepchildren: “I don’t know really what would be considered private, usually everything that is
very personal or private, if I can use it in that sense, usually it’s the mother who talk to them about that.” Bill also suggested this point when describing his limited self-disclosure experiences with his stepdaughter: “Of course fathers do not have the same fully open conversation that mothers do to their daughters.”

In the present study, only stepmothers disclosed information to their stepchildren to seek support or comfort. Stepmothers reported disclosing to seek suggestions or comfort from their stepchildren when confronting problems with their biological children or present spouses. Lisa reported disclosing her frustration to her stepdaughter when her concern about her biological daughter was not taken seriously by her husband: “So I want to tell the stepdaughter [that] this is what your dad’s doing, he doesn’t believe in any of these and I’m not asking for pity you know, I just need to tell someone.” Claiming to have a close relationship with her stepdaughter, Grace also reported talking to her stepdaughter as a source of comfort: “Sometimes I just get frustrated with her dad you know? I’ll tell her about it, and she’s just nice. She knows what I’m going through and who I’m dealing with, because it’s her father.” Ruth also reported the intention to seek support and understanding from her stepchildren by relaying private information about her past relationship to her stepchildren:

I think it would help them to understand more about how I divorced and my relationship with their father being a better relationship, now. So I think I was trying to bond with them by telling them where I was and what make me decided to choose their father.

Researchers (Derlega et al., 1993; Petronio, 2002; Petronio et al., 1984) have argued that women tend to disclose more about their emotions and feelings due to their tendency to value the expression of feelings and to enjoy intimate conversations more than men. Stepmothers in the present study expressed feelings of comfort and intimacy when they disclosed private information to their stepchildren.

In terms of differences in concealment between genders, six out of 15 stepmothers reported
concealing information for the purpose of protecting stepchildren, whereas only 1 stepfather reported concealing information for the same reason. Stepmothers reported concealing divorce-related information in order to protect stepchildren from the negativity. For example, Judy reported concealing certain information about his stepson’s biological mother in order not to upset him: “My husband told me that when they first got divorced, his [stepson] mom didn’t want him. I was really angry actually, but I didn’t tell him this. He doesn’t need to know this.” Another participant, Ruth, also suggested excluding stepchildren from certain information relating to the divorce in order to protect them from negativity:

There has been a lot tension between their mother, their dad and me over the last five years. The mother’s custody battles that kind of thing. And I conceal this information from them in quite a few occasions [because] I didn’t think it was something beneficial for them to know. I thought it was important, you know, not to use them as pawns.

Moreover, stepmothers also concealed information for fear of burdening or bothering their stepchildren. For instance, Helen described feeling frustrated about having an distant relationship with her stepson; however, she had never revealed this frustration to her stepson. When being asked the reason she did not disclose, she explained:

Because I don’t think he [stepson] will understand. I’m basically an outsider to him. It’s sad. I don’t want to worry him in any way you know, because he had a lot to worry about already, [such as] his wife, job or whatever. I think it would be better for him if [the situation] stays this way.

Helen was concerned about troubling her stepson by disclosing her frustration about their relationship. Dorothy also described concealing her financial hardship from stepchildren for fear of burdening them:

The house we [my husband and I] are living in right now belongs to my stepdaughter. And we pay her rent every month. There’s one time, we had a financial problem, but we didn’t say anything to her. We didn’t ask for an extension [for the rent], we just paid, like we always do. They are already very nice to us. We don’t want to burden her.

Stepmothers were more likely than stepfathers to engage in self-disclosures to stepchildren in order to fulfill a nurturing role as a mother and to help them through difficult circumstances.
related to divorce. Additionally, stepmothers tended to disclose in order to gain support or comfort from stepchildren. As their motivations for concealing information, more stepmothers than stepfathers reported concealing information in order to protect children from difficult divorce situations as well as situations that might potentially burden or worry them. Overall, stepmothers’ protective and nurturing nature may be a factor affecting their decisions to self-disclose or conceal private information with their stepchildren.

Stepfathers

Unlike stepmothers, stepfathers in the present study often chose to disclose for the purpose of educating or guiding their stepchildren. Seven stepfathers reported disclosing for the purpose of educating and guiding stepchildren, whereas only two stepmothers reported disclosing for the same reason. Frank described his experience of self-disclosing with his stepchildren:

With her [stepdaughter], I always give her a real life experience. [I told her] this is what happened to me, or I asked her questions such as “have you ever thought about this?” and let her figure out on her own.

Similarly, Jason suggested giving life experiences in order to guide his stepson:

When he [stepson] was a child, and would be in trouble at school. And I would be explaining to him and gave him examples of things I’ve went through in my life. And the point I was trying to make to him was [that] you can do the right thing a hundred times and it only takes one time to do the wrong thing. It takes a lot of effort to develop a reputation and you spend that much more time trying to make up for your [wrongdoings]. I was just trying to give him an example of how I’ve gone through same type of things, and the things I did to get beyond the trouble-the consequences of the trouble.

Bill gave an interesting answer when the interviewer asked him about his self-disclosure experience with his stepdaughter. He replied: “I taught her to drive, and I tried to help her with some action about not endanger[ing] yourself to avoid a rabbit. “

According to Derlega et al. (1993) and Petronio (2002), gender has an impact on self-disclosure in close family relationships. It is possible that gender expectations for men to appear tough, responsible, and decisive directed stepfathers to engage in such disclosure in order to be
perceived by their stepchildren as accountable. It is also possible that men are less likely than women to engage in self-disclosure (Derlega et al., 1993; Petronio, 2002) and thus choose to report “less personal” topics such as education and guiding experience when asked by the interviewer about experiences of sharing private information with stepchildren.

Stepfathers were also more likely than stepmothers to claim that they conceal nothing from their stepchildren. Seven stepfathers, as compared with one stepmother, reported being completely open with their stepchildren. Some of the male participants even displayed dissatisfaction or seemed offended when asked about concealing information from their stepchildren. For example, one of the male participants replied to the interview questions by saying, “you know it sounds terrible when you say reveal or conceal. Again, there are reasons not letting people know certain things and it’s usually personal information.” Interestingly, five stepfathers referred to concealment as “hiding” information, whereas no stepmothers objected to the term. Some of the stepfathers claimed that they did not “hide” anything from their stepchildren. One of the participants, George, claimed:

I don’t have anything to hide. I try to live my life in the open. There’s not really anything to conceal. He [stepson] sees me everyday [and knows] what kind of life I live, so I don’t have anything to hide from him. [I] try to let him know that he should live the same way.

Another participant, Ken, also asserted that he maintained open communication with his stepchildren: “No, not really. I mean I don’t think it’s really that big of a deal, because I don’t really hide anything from them. I just you know, may not share.” Similarly, Frank noted:

I would honestly say in that regards, we’re completely transparent with the kids [stepchildren]. I think we’re very open with anything they wanted to know. I’m open with anything they want to know about me personally. If they have questions, I would be more than happy to share with them. I can’t think of anything that I would hide from them.

Dennis reported not having experienced telling something private to his stepson: “I don’t think I have this kind of experience. I don’t intentionally hide from him or anything.”

Stepfathers tended to interpret the term “conceal” as a negative behavior that they should
not engage in communicating with their stepchildren. It could be possible that men tend to perceive themselves in the role of a protector and bread-winner in the family. Thus, they should not engage in “hiding” behaviors that will reflect cowardness, which may contradict their role as a protector of the family (Cline, 1986; Derlega et al., 1993).
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

My purpose in this study was to explore how stepparents manage their privacy boundaries with regard to information they reveal or conceal from stepchildren. Specifically, I examined the privacy dilemmas stepparents encounter in the stepfamily, stepparents’ motivation to self-disclose or conceal information from stepchildren, and how gender differences influence stepparents’ motivations for self-disclosure.

Results indicated that some stepparents perceived both self-disclosure and concealment as productive in achieving the same goal such as maintaining good relationship with stepchildren or helping stepchildren with situations resulting from divorce. Results suggested that some stepparents may have experienced tension during the on-going process of revealing or concealing private information from their stepchildren, and such contradictory experiences are consistent with Baxter’s (1990) Dialectical theory.

Dialectical Theory

Baxter (1990) and Baxter and Montgomery (1996) have argued that the human communicative process is characterized by the ongoing dynamic interactions resulting from the interplay of contradictions. Humans constitute and make sense of interpersonal relationships through negotiating simultaneous opposing forces (Baxter, 1990; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Baxter and Montgomery (1996) identified three primary contradictions: the dialectics of autonomy and connection; novelty and predictability; and openness and closedness. In the present study, stepparents experienced the dialectics of openness versus closedness. According to Baxter and Montgomery (1996), people manage their privacy boundaries based on the perceived costs and benefits associated with “candor and discretion” (p. 140), and the tension arises from one’s desire to share (candor) and, at the same time, the desire to preserve privacy (discretion).
Researchers (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004) examined the dialectical tensions stepchildren perceived during their communication with stepparents. They found that stepchildren may experience the dialectical tension of openness and closedness with stepparents. Stepchildren understand the importance of candor and openness within stepparent-stepchild relationships, but because they view stepparents as relative “strangers” or could not predict stepparents’ reactions, the stepchildren resist openness. Stepchildren may also perceive discretion as important and necessary.

In this study, data analysis indicated that stepparents experienced dialectical tensions similar to those stepchildren expressed in Baxter et al.’s (2004) research. Results showed that stepparents expressed the desire for open communication and candor with stepchildren. However, stepparents were also “careful” when communicating with stepchildren. Such carefulness inherently conveys the contradiction that some stepparents experienced within stepparent-stepchild communication. Golish (2003) suggested that stepparents in “strong stepfamilies” often adopt an open communicative style with stepchildren. In the present study, some stepparents were well aware of the importance of candor and openness in communicating with their stepchildren.

Participants engaged in open communication with stepchildren for the purpose of establishing trust and closeness in their family relationships. However, stepparents simultaneously expressed discretion and indicated that such openness could negatively influence their stepchildren or the stepparent-stepchild relationships. For instance, Judy experienced such contradictions in communicating with her stepson about his biological mother. Conversation about her stepson’s biological mother was a “taboo” in the family because his biological mother gave him up while he was still very young. However, Judy indicated that she and her stepson talked about his mother sometimes while her husband was not around. Judy claimed that she
enjoyed such open conversations with her stepson because it was “positive for bonding.” At the same time, Judy also reported being discreet in such conversations because she was conscious of the negativity it might bring to her stepson as well as to their relationship.

Unlike communication between a biological parent and a child that results from a natural bond, stepparent-stepchild communication can be effortful (Banker & Gaertner, 1998; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Golish, 2003). Some stepparents reported the desire to express their expectations for stepchildren because they viewed the stepchildren as their biological children. Stepparents felt responsible for educating the stepchildren and expected the best for them, just as parents would hope for their biological children. However, stepparents expressed hesitation about revealing such expectations to their stepchildren because without a biological bond, stepparents were much more aware of the potential negative influence on the stepparent-stepchild relationship. In this study, stepparents perceived such expectations would discomfort stepchildren and negatively influence their relationships. Such contradiction was found in Grace’s explanation about why she decided not to reveal her expectations to her stepdaughter.

Grace hoped her stepdaughter could experience the same fruitfulness that religion has brought to her by going to church. Simultaneously, she expressed concern that such open conversations would be compelling and negatively influence their relationship. Grace expressed:

People don’t want to be forced, they want to make that decision on their own. I try to avoid anything that’s gonna cause anything negative between us. I wouldn’t [do the same] with my own children. With my own children, it’s kinda like they unconditionally love me because I’m their mother. But she has a mother and she could choose not to have a relationship with me. So I’m very careful not to jeopardize the trust we have now, very careful.

Grace experienced the tension between openness and closedness. She wanted the best for her stepdaughter because she perceived her stepdaughter as her biological daughter, but feared that the lack of “unconditional love” might bring about detrimental consequences to their relationship.

Parental authority was another aspect that influenced stepparents’ perception of having
open conversations with their stepchildren. Stepparents felt the responsibility to discipline their stepchildren because they viewed their stepchildren as biological children. However, some stepparents refrained from enacting such responsibilities because of a role ambiguity inherent in the stepparent-stepchild relationships. For example, Eva described such dialectical tensions when handling a dilemmatic situation after accidentally discovering a marijuana pipe in her stepson’s room. She expressed her struggle between confronting her stepson for the purpose of educating him versus remaining silent because she was not sure whether her stepson perceived her as having such rights. This finding supported existing research, which revealed that the stepparent role is often difficult and hard to identify clearly in stepfamily households (Ganong & Coleman 2004; Moore & Cartwright, 2005; Svare, Jay & Mason, 2004). Interestingly, Baxter et al. (2004) also found such contradictions in relationships between stepchildren and stepparents with regarded to stepparent authority. Baxter et al. (2004) concluded that stepchildren “reported a positive response when they were given parent-like attention, affection, support and guidance from the stepparent, yet they resisted granting the stepparent authority over them because the stepparent was not the ‘real’ parent” (p. 463). Researchers (Bray & Berger, 1993; Moore & Cartwright, 2005) have suggested that stepparents adopt a minor role in parental authority during the initial stages of establishing a stepfamily; however, the interplay of dialectical tensions in both stepparents and stepchildren regarding the influence of stepparent authority in the process of stepparent role identification has received little attention.

The present study revealed specific instances of dialectical tensions in stepfamily contexts. Stepparents in the present study demonstrated openness as an idealized communicative style that is beneficial to stepparent-stepchild relationship. At the same time, they also expressed resistance toward such openness. Some stepparents in this study also disclosed a sense of unfamiliarity toward stepchildren, which intensified the perceived risks in sabotaging relationships with
stepchildren if such openness was not managed properly.

Dialectical theory could serve as a better way to clarify or explain stepparents’ motivation of disclosing or concealing certain information from their stepchildren; however dialectical tension in stepparents’ privacy management was not the intention of this study. In order to better understand stepparent-stepchild communication in regard with privacy management, I propose future research to explore how such dialectical tensions influence and function within stepparent-stepchild communication and how these tensions positively or negatively influence stepparent-stepchild relationships. Future researchers should also probe how dialectical tensions stepparents experience change over time. Moreover, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) proposed strategies people use to manage dialectical tensions: spiraling, segmentation, balance, integration, reframing and reaffirmation. Future researchers should examine how stepparents manage dialectical tensions within stepparent-stepchild relationships. Finally, the present study only examined perspectives from stepparents. According to Baxter (2006), dialectical contradictions are managed through “jointly enacted communication” (p. 138); future researchers should examine perspectives from both stepparents and stepchildren in order to arrive at a better understanding of how dialectical tensions constitute stepparent-stepchild relationships through mutual interactions.

Communication privacy management Theory

Petronio (2004) indicated that “a theory cannot survive without questioning and examination” (p. 205) and thus called for researchers to keep CPM alive by applying it to as many contexts as possible. The present study expanded the understanding of CPM theory in the stepfamily context by exploring how stepparents’ motives influenced their privacy boundaries.
accessibility when interacting with stepchildren. Petronio (2000, 2002) has proposed the boundary metaphor to explain how individuals manage their privacy access. Moreover, Petronio (2000, 2002) has argued that privacy boundary access is partially driven by one’s motivation. Results in the current study contributed to the understanding of how stepparents manage self-disclosures within stepparent-stepchild relationships, as well as stepparents’ motives for revealing or concealing private information with their stepchildren. Previous research (Derlega et al., 1993 & Derlega et al., 2008) have concluded that self-disclosure serves the function of relationship development and is a factor that could increase intimacy or closeness within relationships. However, in the present study I discovered that stepparents found disclosure and concealment to be equally successful in achieving a closer relationship with stepchildren.

Researchers (Baxter et al., 2004; Golish, 2003; Golish & Caughlin, 2002) have explored stepchildren’s perceived productivity in concealing private information from stepparents. Additionally, researchers (Baxter et al., 2004; Golish, 2003; Golish & Caughlin, 2002) have indicated that stepchildren sometimes perceived communicative avoidance as a way to avoid hurt and ensure privacy. In the present study, stepparents were also found to perceive concealment as productive in establishing and maintaining good relationships with stepchildren or preventing stepchildren from getting hurt. For instance, some stepparents avoided giving negative comments about stepchildren’s non-resident biological parents because they perceived potential negative consequences in discussing such topics with their stepchildren. Stepparents avoided talking about their negative thoughts or revealing negative information about stepchildren’s non-resident biological parents because they did not want to hurt their stepchildren’s feelings. Moreover, they did not want to be perceived as an “enemy” by their stepchildren by going against their birth parents. As a result, future researchers should not over encourage openness as an ideal communicative style within stepparent-stepchild relationship, but should examine the effects of
concealment on parent-child and stepparent-stepchild relationships as well.

One of the purposes of this study was to examine privacy dilemmas in stepfamilies. The current study found 3 types of privacy dilemmas within stepfamily households based on stepparents’ perspectives: confidant dilemma, accidental dilemma, and interdependence dilemma. Stepparents who encountered privacy dilemmas were caught up in the struggle of disclosing or concealing private information. If stepparents choose to disclose, conflict may arise among family members. On the other hand, concealing information may potentially cause family problems. Privacy dilemmas represent a form of privacy rules violation that leads to boundary turbulence (Petrosnio, 2002). Petronio (2002) indicated that “[Privacy] boundaries become turbulent when individuals are put into binds, where the solutions are problematic” (p. 200). Moreover, such turbulence indicates a violation of existing privacy rules and causes family members to question the existing rules as well develop new rules or seek adjustment (Petronio, 2002). In this study, a majority of stepparents encountered privacy dilemmas with their stepchildren. Although researchers (Petronio, 2002; Petronio & Caughlin, 2006) have examined the existence of privacy dilemmas within first-marriages families, the present study found that privacy dilemmas also exist in stepfamilies, especially within stepparent-stepchild relationships. Privacy dilemmas discovered in stepfamily households suggested the complication of stepparent-stepchild relationships in two ways: first, the dialectical tensions resulting from stepparents’ role ambiguity when interacting with stepchildren; second, stepparents in the present study tended to experience more privacy boundary turbulence with stepchildren than with other members in the family.

First, stepparents in the present study revealed hesitance in adopting a disciplinary role when reporting dilemmatic situations. Pacey (2005) indicated that stepparents often have ill-defined roles between being a parent or a friend to their stepchildren, and this ambiguity often
results from the altruistic behavior of stepparents. Stepparents in the present study suggested being effortful in maintaining positive relationships with stepchildren. For example, one of the participants, Sarah, refrained from showing disapproval of her stepdaughter’s tattoo and did not reported it to her husband because of her desire to be perceived by her stepdaughter as “on her team.” Moreover, stepparents who reported experiencing interdependence dilemmas also suggested such tension resulting from the stepparents’ role ambiguity as well as an altruistic behavior in order to maintain positive stepparent-stepchild relationships. For example, Grace experienced a tension between educating her stepchildren with responsible consumer behaviors versus maintaining a positive stepparent-stepchild relationship. Grace refrained from voicing her concern about her stepchildren’s consumer behavior because she perceived the confrontation with her stepchildren would negatively influence their relationships. The privacy dilemmas stepparents reported manifested stepparents’ difficulties in managing stepparent-stepchild relationships. Some stepparents reported a need to balance constantly between adopting a discipline role versus engaging in altruistic behavior in order to maintain positive stepparent-stepchild relationships.

Second, among the 12 stepparents who reported experiencing privacy dilemmas, eleven of them suggested experiencing privacy dilemmas with stepchildren, which indicated that stepparents tend to experience more privacy boundary turbulence with stepchildren. The result is partially consistent with previous research (Caughlin et al. 2000; Caughlin & Petronio, 2006), which has suggested that stepfamily members tend to keep rigid privacy boundaries with one another and are more likely to experience privacy boundary turbulence at the initial stages of a stepfamily. In this study, the average length of being a stepparent was 12 years. Nevertheless, stepparents were still more likely to report experiencing privacy dilemma with stepchildren even though they have known the stepchildren for a long period of time.
Findings in the present study suggested that the influence of personal relationships may complicate the process of privacy boundary coordination. Petronio (2002) suggested that privacy dilemmas that occur in family contexts can be significant because “the ties that members have complicate the way they manage their boundaries” (p. 199). Results suggested that stepparent-stepchildren relationships seem to complicate stepparents’ privacy boundary coordination within the stepfamily. Stepparents were discreet when handling dilemmatic situations with their stepchildren, because the stepparents perceived a difference between their relationships with their stepchildren versus biological children. For example, some stepparents reported handling dilemmatic situations with stepchildren more discreetly as compared to biological children because of the different levels of “unconditional love” the stepchildren receive from stepparents. Moreover, the ambiguity inherent in a stepparent’s role also influences stepparents’ decisions to handle such dilemmatic situations with or about their stepchildren.

Privacy boundary turbulence leads family members to question the existing rules for managing privacy boundaries, as well as develop new rules or seek adjustment to existing rules (Petronio & Caughlin, 2006). Future researchers should explore how such stepchildren-related privacy dilemmas impact stepparents’ perceptions about their privacy rule coordination with stepchildren and how they coordinate their privacy boundaries with stepchildren differently than they do with their biological children.

Over half of the participants in the present study reported not having experienced privacy dilemmas with members in the stepfamilies. The duration of stepfamilies might be one of the crucial variables that influence the emergence of privacy dilemmas in stepfamily households. Stepparents in the present study reported having been in the current stepfamily for an average of 12 years. Stepfamily members who have known each other for such a long time may have become familiar with one another’s privacy rules and have developed a satisfying boundary
coordination among family members. Thus, privacy boundary coordination reduces the chances of violating members’ privacy rules that may create privacy dilemmas.

According to Petronio (2000), privacy boundary turbulence is more likely to occur when people move into new environment or experience major life changes. Such shifts often require people to adapt their privacy rules in order to achieve boundary coordination with others, such as members in the initial stages of stepfamilies. As a result, newly-formed stepfamily members may experience more intense boundary turbulence than members in established stepfamilies. Future researchers may have interesting findings on privacy dilemmas of stepfamily by examining members in newly-formed stepfamilies who may experience salient dilemmatic situations regarding privacy boundary management.

The finding of the present study suggested that stepparents’ communicative style may differ based on the length of the stepfamily. Researchers (Mills, 1984; Papernow, 1984) have examined how stepfamilies develop over time. For example, Papernow (1984) suggested seven stages of stepfamily development from the perspectives of stepparents. The stages included: (1) fantasy, (2) assimilation, (3) awareness, (4) mobilization, (5) action, (6) contact, and (7) resolution. Nevertheless, no researchers have explored how the length of stepfamily affects stepparent-stepchild communication. Future researchers could improve our understanding about stepfamily communication by looking into how stepparents modify their communicative style when negotiating privacy rules with stepchildren over time. Additionally, Golish (2003) compared the communication style of stepparents from “strong” stepfamilies with stepparents from stepfamilies having more difficulties; however, no researchers has examined differences in stepparent-stepparent communication styles in newly-formed stepfamilies and established stepfamilies. Future researchers should compare and contrast the stepparent-stepchild communication regarding privacy boundary management between newly-formed stepfamilies
and established stepfamilies in order to determine how the length of stepfamily influences stepparents’ privacy rule adjustment.

Additionally, the findings of this study suggested that participants who reported not having experienced privacy dilemmas with members in the stepfamily tended to express that they have open communication with stepfamily members, especially with stepchildren. For example, when asked about the experiences of struggling between when to tell or not to tell, one of the participants, Frank, replied, “No, I don’t have any skeleton in the closet. I’m pretty transparent, pretty open, and I have never, never concealed anything. I’m pretty open about things.” Among the 18 participants who reported not having experienced privacy dilemmas in stepfamily households, 8 participants suggested they often adopt an open communicative style with members in the stepfamily, including with their stepchildren. Petronio (2002) indicated that family members need to negotiate and coordinate privacy rules with one another in order to achieve an acceptable privacy regulation in the family. According to Golish (2003), stepparents who adopt open communication are more likely to facilitate stepparent-stepchild communication as well as metacommunication. Stepparents who encourage open communication may engage in more open discussion about privacy rule coordination with family members as compared to stepparents who do not encourage open communication. As a result, stepparents who adopt open communication styles may encourage family members to discuss and negotiate privacy rules and thus reduce the chance of privacy boundaries that could result in privacy dilemmas. However, no researcher has examined the relationship between stepfamily communication and the occurrence and types of privacy dilemma. Future researchers should explore how stepparents’ communication styles influence their privacy rules coordination with family members, especially with stepchildren. Moreover, future research should also look into how stepparents’ communication style influence stepchildren’s and stepparents’ privacy rule re-coordination after
privacy boundary turbulence occurs.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study has contributed to an understanding of stepparents’ perceived privacy management in stepparent-stepchild relationships, several limitations of the current study exist. First, the current study did not take stepchildren’s gender into consideration. Some stepparents suggested that the gender of their stepchildren might influence their decisions to self-disclose or conceal private information. For example, one stepfather suggested that “of course fathers do not have a fully open conversation that mothers do to their daughters.” Additionally, Dindia and Allen (1992) concluded that sex of the target affects an individual’s self-disclosing behavior. For example, women tend to disclose more to same sex targets than men do to women. Future researchers should look into how gender of stepchildren influences stepparents’ decisions about disclosing or concealing certain topics, as well as how gender influence stepparents’ motivations for disclosure and concealment. Second, participants’ choices of receiving a phone interview were uncontrollable. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) suggested telephone interview as one of the effective interview methods for soliciting information about sensitive or private topics. However, Lindlof and Taylor (2002) also suggested the importance of interview context; that is, a place safe from “the presence of others who might listen in” (p. 185). Several participants appeared reluctant to provide details or even refused to answer because of the presence of others, such as their husbands, wives, or stepchildren. Face-to-face interviews may be useful to overcome such shortcomings in future studies. Third, the average duration of stepfamily establishment in present study was 12 years; participants may have had difficulties in recalling details of their overall experiences with stepchildren. It would be helpful to interview stepparents who are in the formative years of establishing a stepfamily in order to gain more concrete data.

Based on the findings of this study, future researchers are encouraged to engage in
longitudinal studies in order to understand better how stepparents develop and coordinate their privacy rules with stepchildren over time. Time can be a factor in determining the development of a stepfamily establishment through changes and adjustments of stepparents’ privacy boundary toward stepchildren. Moreover, future researchers should solicit both stepparents and stepchildren from the same stepfamily household for interviews in order to better understand how stepparents’ motives of concealment and disclosure are perceived by stepchildren, as well as how such disclosures and concealment are negotiated and coordinated between stepparents and stepchildren. 

Finally, Coleman, Ganong, and Fine (2000) suggested that existing researchers tend to homogenize stepfamily characteristics and reinforce the public’s assumptions about stepfamilies. In the current study, the heterogeneous findings about stepparents’ experiences about privacy dilemmas could serve as a reminder for future researchers in the area of stepfamily communication. Even though stepfamilies share certain characteristics, researchers should not ignore stepfamily individuality. Future researchers are encouraged to explore how stepfamily individuality could contribute to a better understanding of stepfamily communication.

The present study expands the understanding of CPM within stepparent-stepchild relationships and provides a better understanding of stepparents’ negotiation processes between revealing and concealing private information from stepchildren. The results are potentially helpful for stepparents as they seek to understand, clarify, or to self-monitor their privacy management behaviors when interacting with stepchildren. Furthermore, the present study also highlights the importance of dialectical tensions in understanding interpersonal relationships as well as self-disclosures. Effective monitoring skills in experiencing such tensions inherent in private self-disclosures can lead to a better outcome for stepparent-stepchild communication.
APPENDIX

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
1. How long has the stepfamily been formed?

2. How many stepchildren do you have?

3. How often do you engage in one-on-one communication with your stepchild?

4. How do you feel about having one-on-one communication with your stepchild?

5. Please describe an experience when you decided to tell your stepchild something you consider private.

6. How do you feel about this disclosing experience? Did you expect anything from it? If so, please describe it.

7. How did it negatively or positively influence the relationship between you and your stepchildren?

8. Please describe an experience when you decided to conceal certain information from your stepchild.

9. How do you feel about this experience and did you expect anything resulting from the concealment? If so, please describe it.

10. How did it negatively or positively influence the relationship between you and your stepchildren?

11. In your present family, please describe a moment/experience that you been through the struggle of not knowing whether to conceal or to reveal certain information to other members in the family.

12. Please answer the questions about your demographic background. The demographic information you provide will only be used for the purpose of this study, and they won’t be used to identify your identity.

(1) What’s your race?
(2) What’s your age?

(3) What’s your educational degree?
REFERENCES


Cline, R. J. (1986). The effects of biological sex and psychological gender on reported and


*Human Communication Research, 29*, 41-80.


International Communication Association, Pennsylvania, United States.


Pacey, S. (2005). Step change: The interplay of sexual and parenting problems when


Marriage and Family, 69, 174–189.


