

BETWEEN A NUCLEAR FAMILY AND A STEPFAMILY:  
GROWING UP WITH MARRIED BIOLOGICAL PARENTS AND OLDER HALF-  
SIBLINGS

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BETWEEN A NUCLEAR FAMILY AND A STEPFAMILY: GROWING UP WITH  
MARRIED BIOLOGICAL PARENTS AND OLDER HALF-SIBLINGS

presented by Caroline Sanner,

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and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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## DEDICATIONS

To Dad.

All that I have accomplished in life is because of you. You built me a ladder and a safety net, and you were there, always, to help me climb or to break my fall. Your hard work, sacrifice, and unconditional love are the cornerstones of my life. You are my hero, and I love you always.

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ABSTRACT

Shared children in stepfamilies (i.e., those who are born into the repartnered family; they live with married biological parents and older half-siblings) have been found to fare worse than other sibling groups on a variety of outcomes. Little is known, however, about the qualitative experiences of these individuals. Using descriptive phenomenology, I conducted interviews with 20 shared children to answer the research question: What is the nature of the experience of being a shared child in a (step)family? Participants ranged in age from 19 to 30 and lived in the same household with their half-sibling(s) for at least some time growing up. Findings indicated that the shared children's life-world contexts were shaped by living in a hybrid "step-nuclear" family; their experiences were characterized by the tension of 'reorganizing' as a nuclear unit but doing so within a larger stepfamily structure. The overriding phenomenon of participants' experiences was *regulating family privacy boundaries* – privacy rules existed surrounding sensitive information about family relatedness, marital histories, stepfamily dynamics, and more. In the absence of information, these children hypothesized about the topics that were not openly discussed in their families – a key part of their lived experiences. Practical implications of the findings are discussed.

## CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to increases in divorce, cohabitation, and remarriage, American families are increasingly diverse and complex. In two recent national surveys, 42% of Americans reported being in a stepfamily (Pew Research Center, 2011), and 24% reported living with a single parent (Current Population Survey, 2016). In response to changes in family structure, scholars have devoted considerable attention towards understanding the ways in which parents' marital status (i.e., never-married, married, divorced, or remarried) impacts child outcomes. Although these demographic changes are important and deserve attention, the scholarly discourse on family structure seldom includes conversations about sibling structure – a critical piece to understanding the relationships and dynamics that shape a child's development. Today, three in 10 American adults reported having a half- or stepsibling, a number that was higher for those under the age of 30 (44%) and for Black adults (45%) and Hispanics (38%; Pew Research Center, 2011). Compared to research on family structure, far less attention has been paid to understanding the ways in which *sibling* structure may impact child outcomes, or how children's experiences of family life differ depending on their sibling compositions.

### **Siblings**

The lack of attention to diverse sibling relationships is surprising given robust evidence that siblings are key players in family life. Scholarly interest in sibling structure variables can be traced back to the late 1800s, beginning with Galton's (1874) analysis of the impact of birth order on achievement. Since then, family researchers have made great strides in documenting siblings' centrality in family life. In a recent review of the literature, McHale, Updegraff, and Whiteman (2012) noted that a search of 1990-2011

abstracts for sibling relationships yielded 741 citations. During those two decades, researchers sought to understand variability in sibling relationship quality and the influences of siblings on personal development (McHale et al., 2012). Siblings have reported emotionally closer relationships when they are closer in age, of the same gender, have easy temperaments, and live in families with low spousal conflict and positive parent-child relationships (McHale et al., 2012). Differential treatment by parents, particularly when one parent shows preferential treatment toward one sibling and the other parent does not, has been found to create parent-child coalitions that undermine sibling relationship quality (Kan, McHale, & Crouter, 2008; Solmeyer, Killoren, McHale, & Updegraff, 2011). Additionally, sibling differentiation, when siblings “de-identify from one another by selecting different niches in the family and develop distinct personal qualities,” (McHale et al., 2012, p. 921) has been found to protect siblings from rivalry and jealousy, leading to warmer and less conflicted relationships.

Moreover, extensive contacts typical of siblings in childhood provide ample opportunity for them to shape each other’s behavior and development (Brody; 2004; Dunn, 1988; McHale et al., 2012). Siblings have been described as companions, role models, confidants, combatants, and “the focus of social comparisons” (McHale et al., p. 913). Because of the frequency with which siblings engage in conflict, siblings are well positioned for developing skills in perspective-taking, emotional understanding, negotiation, persuasion, and problem-solving (Dunn, 2007; Howe, Rinaldi, Jennings, & Petrakos, 2002), benefits that can extend throughout the life course. For instance, close sibling relationships in young adulthood relate to enhanced self-esteem and decreased loneliness later (Sherman, Lansford, & Volling, 2006), and siblings in middle and late

adulthood have been identified as sources of support, providers of care, and trusted confidants (Connidis & Campbell, 1995; van Volkom, 2006).

The vast majority of sibling research has focused on biological siblings in first-marriage nuclear families (McHale et al., 2012). The growing prevalence of diverse sibling relationships warrants attention be paid to exploring this complexity. Specifically, because adults are increasingly having children with multiple partners (Meyer, Cancian, & Cook, 2005), the prevalence of *half-siblings* is growing. Unlike *siblings* (i.e., individuals who genetically share the same mother and father), *half-siblings* share a biological connection to one parent only.

### **Half-Sibling Relationships**

Although less is known about half-sibling relationships compared to full sibling relationships, research on this topic is growing. In a systematic integrative review of the research conducted on half- and stepsiblings, Sanner, Russell, Coleman, and Ganong (in press) found that the research suggests small but consistent deficits associated with the presence of half-siblings in the household. Living with a half-sibling was associated with lower parental involvement, educational achievement, and economic well-being (Baxter, 2012; Brown, Manning, & Stykes, 2015; Ginther & Pollak, 2004; Halpern-Meekin & Tach, 2008; Stewart, 2005; Strow & Strow, 2008; Tillman, 2008; Turunen, 2014); more anti-social behavior, depressive symptoms, and parent-child conflict (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Fomby, Goode, & Mollborn, 2016; Halpern-Meekin & Tach, 2008; Harcourt, Adler-Baeder, Erath, & Pettit, 2015; Schlomer, Ellis, & Garber, 2010; Strow & Strow, 2008); increased risk of family dissolution (Jensen & Clausen, 2003); early exit from the

parental home (Aquilino, 1991); and more frequent unintentional childhood injuries (Tanskanen, Danielsbacka, & Rokirch, 2015).

The general finding that youth with half-siblings fare worse than those without them could potentially be explained by the fact that sibling complexity may be a proxy for family structure. In other words, the presence of a half-sibling generally indicates that parents have separated and repartnered, meaning family members have undergone multiple changes in family structure prior to the birth of a half-sibling. This theory suggests that the experience of multiple family transitions, not the presence of a half-sibling per se, is what explains children's poorer outcomes. This theory leaves out a critical, and often overlooked, population of half-siblings: shared children in (step)families.

### **Shared Children in (Step)families**

Shared children are those who are born into the repartnered family (Ganong & Coleman, 1988). To illustrate, consider the following example of Tom and Lisa (see Figure 1). Tom has two sons, Brett and Brian, from his first marriage to Tracy. Lisa has two daughters, Erin and Emily, from her first marriage to John. When Tom and Lisa marry, they form a stepfamily; Tom becomes a stepfather to Lisa's children, Lisa becomes a stepmother to Tom's children, and their children become stepsiblings. Tom and Lisa then have a shared child together, Ava. Although Ava is born into a stepfamily and has older half-siblings from her parents' previous partnerships, she resides with her two married, biological parents.

Traditional measures of family structure would classify Ava as living in a nuclear household, entirely missing the sibling complexity from having older half-siblings. In an

innovative exploration of family structure and child well-being, Brown, Manning, and Stykes (2015) argued that the traditional approach to conceptualizing family structure relies solely on children's relationships to the parental adult(s) in the household, failing to capture children's relationships to siblings. To address this shortcoming, Brown and colleagues advocated for a measure of *family complexity* that is inclusive of half- or stepsiblings in the household, a concept that "broadens the scope by shifting attention away from the parent(s) to the siblings" (p. 187). In conjunction with family structure, they argued that the inclusion of family complexity would allow for a more holistic understanding of the impact of family composition on child outcomes. Their findings suggest that such a conceptualization of family structure (and accompanying measurement) is necessary. Specifically, family complexity was negatively associated with children's economic well-being, but this association was strongest in children with two married biological parents and older half-siblings. In other words, in what is widely considered to be the most advantageous family structure (i.e., two married biological parents), the presence of half-siblings appeared to have the most negative consequences.

Similarly, other studies found that shared children scored lower than other groups of siblings on a variety of outcomes, such as educational attainment, anti-social behavior, and depressive symptoms (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Ginther & Pollak, 2004; Halpern-Meehin & Tach, 2008; Harcourt, Adler-Baeder, Erath, & Pettit, 2015; Strow & Strow, 2008; Tillman, 2008). For instance, the educational outcomes of stepchildren and their half-siblings, who were the shared children of both parents in the household, were similar to each other and significantly worse than children reared in traditional nuclear families (Ginther & Pollak, 2004). Moreover, sibling structure has been found to be more

predictive than parents' marital status. In other words, children living with a parent and stepparent who had no half-siblings scored the same on educational attainment and anti-social behavior outcomes as children living with both biological parents who had no half-siblings. However, children living with both biological parents who had an older half-sibling displayed deficits (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Halpern-Meekin & Tach, 2008; Strow & Strow, 2008; Tillman, 2008). Put simply, the presence of half-siblings appears to negatively impact children's outcomes, even (or especially) when children live with both biological parents. Why is this so? What about shared children's experiences put them at higher risk for negative outcomes? Family systems theory offers a potential lens for understanding why.

### **Family Systems Theory**

According to family systems theory, what happens in one subsystem affects all other subsystems throughout the family (White & Klein, 2008). Although shared children appear to live in nuclear families on the surface (if they were filling out surveys, for example, they would mark that they live with two married biological parents, and we would assume that they are in nuclear families), there is a layer of complexity that we miss by failing to recognize that their parents are in second (or third, etc.) marriages. The older half-siblings of shared children are stepchildren; they live with a biological parent and a stepparent, so although shared children themselves may not have stepparents, they may live in a household in which stepparent-stepchild relationships exist. Similarly, although shared children do not have stepsiblings themselves, if both of their parents have children from previous relationships (e.g., Ava), then their older half-siblings are

stepsiblings. When this is true, the dynamics of stepsibling relationships surely impact the lives of younger half-siblings who are biologically related to both parties.

Furthermore, if the older half-siblings of shared children (e.g., Brett, Brian, Emily, and Erin) are part of shared custody arrangements, they may transition between two homes, even while the shared child (Ava) is situated in one household. In other words, although shared children themselves are not transitioning between two households, their older siblings might be, so shared children may indirectly experience the cyclical nature of having older half-siblings in and out of the home. In accordance with family systems theory, just because the shared children are not directly involved in these transitions or dynamics does not mean they are unaffected by them. What happens in other subsystems in the family unit (i.e., between stepparents and stepchildren, between stepsiblings, or across households) surely effects the lived experience of younger half-siblings who share biological connections to everyone in the home. In many ways, however, shared children experience an “invisible” type of complexity that is largely ignored by researchers. Their reality is something between that of a nuclear family and a stepfamily, not quite one but not quite the other.

To understand the outcomes of shared children, it is necessary to understand their experiences. However, no investigation to date has qualitatively explored the experiences of individuals who grow up with married biological parents and older half-siblings from their parents’ previous partnerships. To address this gap in the literature, the current study used phenomenological methods to explore the lived experiences of shared children in (step)families.

## **The Present Study**

Because the purpose of descriptive phenomenology is to describe and clarify the experience as it is lived and understood, a Husserlian descriptive phenomenological method (Porter, 1998) was chosen to direct the present study. Husserl (1913/1962) developed the philosophy because he believed that exploration of lived experience was superseded by the “continued study of scientific constructs” (Porter, 1998, p. 19), and for scholars to better understand their own constructs, it was necessary to understand the structures of experience. The present investigation describes the experience of growing up with married biological parents and older half-siblings. Specifically, the primary research question is: What is the nature of the experience of being a shared child in a (step)family?

### **Steps in Conducting Husserlian Descriptive Phenomenology**

Based on the guideline’s set forth by Porter’s (1994, 1998) adaptation of Husserl’s ideas of phenomenology, the following steps were followed to ensure a rigorous investigation: (a) bracketing conventional knowledge pertaining to (half-)siblings in (step)families (i.e., conducting a thorough literature review), (b) reflecting on my own experiences pertinent to the phenomena of interest, (c) asking participants to described their experiences of being a shared child, (d) analyzing data by delineating and comparing intentions of each participant, (e) engaging in discussions about phenomena with colleagues, and (f) integrating conventional knowledge with the data analysis.

## CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

The current study used a Husserlian descriptive phenomenological method to guide data collection and analyses (Husserl, 1962). A feature of the phenomenological approach involves bracketing (Husserl, 1962; Porter, 1998). The purpose of bracketing is for the researcher to recognize, reflect on, and set aside his or her personal experience with and conventional knowledge of the phenomenon of interest (Porter, 1998). By doing so, the researcher seeks to minimize his or her influence on the processes of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data, allowing for a more sharpened focus on the participants' experiences. Bracketing is meant to be a continuous process that occurs throughout data collection and analysis, but phenomenologists have advised beginning this process with a personal reflection (Husserl, 1962; Porter, 1994). What follows is my personal reflection on my familiarity with the phenomenon of being a shared child with older half-siblings.

### **Bracketing Personal Experience**

I grew up in a home with a shared child. My younger half-brother, Ryan, is the son of my father and stepmother. He was born into our (step)family when I was 12 years old.

Despite being a part of the same family, Ryan's family experiences are drastically different from my own. My parents divorced when I was five, my dad remarried my stepmom when I was seven, my mom remarried my stepdad when I was 12 and divorced him when I was 17, and by the time I left for college I had lived in seven different homes. Ryan knows no such transitions; in his lifetime, he has lived in one home with parents who have always been married. Ryan and I are incredibly close – he means more to me

than I can say – but the disparities in our upbringing are palpable. We are members of the same family, but our family experiences are markedly different. I find this fascinating.

For most of my life, I did not give much thought to understanding life through Ryan’s eyes. Because my parents had 50/50 custody, I transitioned frequently between their houses (along with my full sibling Patrick), but I never thought about what their routines, dynamics, and lives were like when I was not there. My mental image of Ryan’s family life was the image I had of it when *I* was there – picking him up from school, sitting with him at dinner, saying goodnight before bed. Another 50% of his life, though, took place when I was not there – when Patrick and I were with our mother, and Ryan lived in a family of three instead of a family of five.

As I grew older, I began to think about Ryan’s experience more deeply. I started wondering which version of family life he preferred – did he prefer being an only child, or did he prefer having siblings in the household? How did he feel when Patrick and I left to go to our mom’s? How did he feel when we came back? I went to a school picnic of his when he was in fifth grade, and I remember Ryan introducing me to his new friends. “That’s not your sister,” they said. “She’s *too old* to be your sister!” Although large age gaps between siblings are not necessarily unique to half-sibling relationships, it was something that his friends (all of whom were close in age to their full biological siblings) were unfamiliar with. When I asked Ryan about this once, he told me it was “kind of weird” to have siblings who were in college since none of his friends did. Both his peers and teachers often assumed he was an only child, and I remember watching him struggle with how to articulate his family circumstances to others. In kindergarten, for instance, he was asked to draw a picture of his family, and he included my biological mother in the

drawing (they have always had a close relationship). Not knowing how to describe his relationship to her, he labeled her as his stepmother. This understandably confused his teacher, who knew that his biological parents were married, and Ryan did not in fact have any stepparents. I assume Ryan decided that my mother was his stepmother because *his* mother is *my* stepmother (and his logic makes sense). Since my parents are divorced and remarried, I have always been afforded the luxury of having a family situation that is “complicated.” People understand that it is complicated; I have the history of family transitions to prove it. Ryan lives with two married biological parents though, and he does not have a history of family transitions, so people are confused as to what makes his family situation complicated. To me, his complexity seems less visible than mine. He lives in something that is in between a nuclear family and a stepfamily, not quite one but not quite the other. I find this interesting. Herein lies my drive to understand the lived experiences of shared children.

Feminist family scholar Katherine Allen has called for researchers to move away from the assumption that we are blank slates in studying our areas of interest. Although there is value in seeking to minimize our biases and put aside our personal perspectives, it is irresponsible to assume that we are emotionally remote agents studying our interests through a lens of objectivity (Allen, 2000). For us to truly serve the families we study, Allen says, “we must be willing to risk stating what we really believe and what really motivates our work” (p. 6). She argues that in addition to our ethical duty to do so, our work benefits methodologically from embracing these truths; “Rigor is in fact compromised,” Allen argues, “when we ignore this important part of the scholarly mode of production” (p. 6).

The purpose of my personal essay on the topic of shared children is not to convince myself that, by bracketing this information, I have disentangled my experiences as a family member from my lens as a researcher. I do not believe that my personal background is separate and apart from this study, but rather, that by exploring and understanding my perspectives and biases, I am better equipped to combat their potential to undermine my work. As a part of the present study, reflecting on my personal experience with and conventional knowledge of the phenomenon of interest will not occur only here, but will be an ongoing process throughout data collection and analysis in an effort to think clearly, critically, and reflexively about the data.

### **Rationale for using Husserlian Descriptive Phenomenology**

The purpose of the current research project aligns with the goals of Husserlian descriptive phenomenology. The central goal of Husserlian descriptive phenomenology is to describe and clarify the lived experience of participants (Porter, 1991, 1998). In doing so, the researcher seeks to identify and understand the “essential structure” of that experience and the meanings that participants attach to that experience (Husserl, 1962). Therefore, the lived experience can only be understood by engaging in reflexive dialogue with an individual who has direct experience or interaction with the phenomena of interest (Husserl, 1962). These discussions may reveal countercases to the phenomena (i.e., instances in which a participant’s experience does not fit the pattern of experiences of other individuals in the sample; Sharp, 2003). Descriptive phenomenologists propose that countercases should not be disregarded as outliers, but rather, that they provide opportunities for achieving a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the phenomena of interest (Husserl, 1962; Porter, 1998; Sharp, 2003).

Other qualitative methods were deemed less suitable for the current research question. For instance, grounded theory is well suited for exploring relational processes with the goal of generating theory (e.g., a model of stepparent-stepchild relationships development). However, rather than seeking to understand relational development among half-siblings (for which grounded theory would be an appropriate choice), the focus of this investigation is to understand what it is like to *be* a half-sibling. The essence of the question is one of describing the complexity of half-siblings' experiences, rather than explaining the processes related to that experience. Ethnographic methods also are not well suited for the proposed research question, as ethnography focuses primarily on the construction of culture and relies heavily on observational methods. The current research question, however, seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon of interest by having informants describe their lived experiences, making Husserlian descriptive phenomenology a logical fit.

Based on Porter's (1991, 1994, 1998) interpretation of Husserl's ideas, the present study sought to understand what it is like to grow up with married biological parents and older half-siblings. Following the approach of scholars who used a Husserlian phenomenological approach (Hans & Coleman, 2009; Porter, 1991, 1994; Sharp, 2003; Sharp & Ganong, 2007), I conducted interviews with 20 participants to explore the lived experience of being a shared child.

## **Data Collection**

### **Sampling**

Upon receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), participants were recruited through e-advertisements (see Appendix A) at a major Midwestern

university. Individuals who self-identified as a half- or stepsibling were encouraged to contact the researcher to schedule an interview. Upon contacting me, participants were screened for eligibility and asked for additional information to clarify how their experiences fit the scope of the study. Specifically, they were asked: a) if they had half-siblings, stepsiblings, or both, b) if their half- and/or stepsiblings were older than them or younger, c) about how much time they spent with half- and/or stepsiblings in the same household growing up, and d) if their biological parents were married for most or all of their childhood. The intersection of their answers was used to guide where participants “fit” within the larger project (for instance, a separate study coming from these data will use grounded theory methods to explore relational development among stepsiblings).

Inclusion criteria for the current study included that shared children were between the ages of 18-30 and that they lived in the same household with their half-sibling(s) for at least some time growing up. The proposed age range was chosen because of my specific interest in the experience of growing up as a shared child; shared children in middle and late adulthood are farther removed from this period of their lives. The reasons for including the criterion of having shared a household with half-sibling(s) for at least some time growing up are twofold: a) without having shared a household with half-siblings, shared children would lack the familial context of interest to the study, and b) the existing [quantitative] literature on shared children focuses on youth with residential half-siblings.

### **Sample**

The final sample consisted of 20 shared children (five men and 15 women; see Table 1) who ranged in age from 19 to 30 ( $M = 24.8$ ). Seventeen identified as White, two

identified as African American, and one identified as Hispanic. Shared children had between one and eight half-siblings, with an average of 2.2. Seven shared children had maternal half-siblings, nine had paternal half-siblings, and four had both. Eleven shared children had full siblings in addition to half-siblings.

### **Procedure**

In-person interviews were conducted with each participant. All interviews were conducted by me. I began by describing the informed consent process. I explained that participants were not required to answer any question that made them uncomfortable and that they could stop at any time. I requested permission to audiotape-record the interview and assured them that names would be changed in any published material that resulted from the interview to protect their anonymity. Each interview began with constructing a genogram, a pictorial representation of family structure and membership, which aided in establishing researcher-participant rapport and allows the interviewer to collect relevant demographic information. The interview covered a range of topics using questions designed to elicit information about a variety of aspects related to shared children's lived experience (see Appendix B for a full interview guide). Follow-up interviews were conducted with 10 participants to clarify, expand on, and further sharpen their descriptions of their experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

I followed the systematic steps of the data analysis procedures set forth by Porter (1991, 1994, 1998), which explicate a taxonomy of levels of phenomena, or "structures of lived experience" (1994, p. 41). Transcribed interviews were coded using the Comments feature in Microsoft Word 16.14.1. Each idea was a data analysis unit (Porter,

1994). In reading through the transcripts, I first distinguished among irrelevant data, life-world context, and experience. Irrelevant data were data not germane to the experience of being a shared child and were not used in the analysis. For instance, one participant described a past romantic relationship and said, “My ex was a really good guy. He didn’t drink or anything, so when I came to college I was more focused on grades and didn’t want to party.” Life-world data were data pertinent to the social environment surrounding an individual’s experience. Porter (1995) described the life-world as “the fundamental and permanent reality that one simply takes for granted in the attitude of common sense” (p. 32). The purpose of examining the life-world is to better understand how participants’ experiences are situated within their social and familial contexts.

Lived experience data were grouped into three levels: *intentions*, *component phenomena*, and *phenomena* (Porter, 1994; Sharp, 2003). Intentions are the most basic structure of the phenomenon; they are the ways in which respondents understand and shape their experiences (Porter, 1994). For example, intentions that shared children described included “completing family trees,” “asking parents to explain their family situation,” and “picking up on having different last names from their half-siblings.” Following the identification of intentions within individual transcripts, I compared intentions across participants to group intentions into a second, broader level of *component phenomena*. Porter described this process as “intuitive analysis” that involves “simultaneously describing, comparing, distinguishing, and inferring from the data” (p. 21). I repeatedly asked myself, “How are the intentions fitting together? Are there patterns across intentions?” and “What are shared children *trying to do* with these experiences?” Intentions were grouped into four component phenomena (see Appendix

D). For example, the intentions “completing family trees,” “asking parents to explain their family situation,” and “picking up on having different last names from their half-siblings” were grouped into the component phenomenon “figuring out family relatedness.”

Refining the emergent phenomena was a fluid process. As I grouped intentions and component phenomena, I repeatedly went back to the transcripts to ensure that the developing phenomena were thoroughly represented in the data. I kept a legal pad with me at all times and frequently made notes to track my developing ideas about intentions and recognizing relationships between intentions to develop component phenomena and phenomena. I discussed emergent phenomena with my mentors and advisors; this was a particularly helpful practice given that we occupy different social positions and engaged in intuitive analysis from different social locations and viewpoints. Finally, I identified relationships among the four component phenomena to develop the third level, *phenomenon of the lived experience* (Porter, 1994).

## CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

The central feature of shared children's life-world context was living in *both* a nuclear family *and* a stepfamily. Their collective family structure was a hybrid; the nuclear family (i.e., mom, dad, and shared child[ren]) existed "inside" the stepfamily (i.e., mom, dad, shared child[ren], stepchild[ren], and nonresidential parent[s]). The contradiction of living in a step-nuclear family shaped their upbringings, which were a mix of attempting to 'reorganize' as a nuclear unit but doing so within a stepfamily structure and stepfamily dynamics. In many ways, however, their hybrid family was akin to water to a fish; it was simply the environment in which they had grown up, and it was difficult for them to reflect on the ways in which this familial context shaped their lived experiences. I intuited similarities about how the contradiction embedded within this hybrid family structure produced consequences for the lived experiences of shared children. Tempered with selected instances of counterexamples, the findings reflect the interplay between the life-world context of living in a hybrid step-nuclear family and the experiences of being a shared child.

### **Experiences of Shared Children**

The experiences of shared children in (step)families were characterized by the tension of 'reorganizing' as a nuclear unit but doing so within a larger stepfamily structure. Despite the heterogeneity of their lives, there were similarities related to the experience of being a shared child. The overriding phenomenon of participants' experiences was *regulating family privacy boundaries*. The histories, relationships, and dynamics of shared children's families were complex, and most participants knew surprisingly little about these dynamics. Although the openness or closedness of

communication boundaries existed on a continuum, participants usually described boundaries that were closer to the ‘closed’ end of the spectrum. In the absence of information, these children hypothesized about the topics that were not openly discussed in their families – a key part of their lived experiences. Regulating communication impacted shared children’s experiences in important ways. Four component phenomena were developed: (a) Figuring out family relatedness, (b) Learning family histories, (c) Understanding family dynamics, and (d) Assessing half-sibling relationship quality.

### **Figuring Out Family Relatedness**

Living in a hybrid “step-nuclear” family meant that understanding how all family members were connected to each other was sometimes confusing. Shared children experienced a time, usually in middle to late childhood, when they began to “piece together” how the various members of their family were related. Sometimes, parents had explicit conversations with their children to help them understand the family structure. Kirsten explained, “I remember sitting down with Dad and doing [a] genealogy, and we were talking about Luke and Joey and when he married Laurie [first wife], and it helped me connect the dots.” Rather than parents initiating these conversations themselves, outside stimuli usually served as catalysts for talking about and understanding family relatedness. For instance, one participant shared:

I always had a feeling something wasn’t right because I remember the picture [of my parents’ wedding], and I saw my sister in the picture, so [I thought] ‘How did this happen? How is my sister in the picture and you guys are married?’ ... So I said something [to my parents], and they went and got my brother, and they sat us both down and explained it all. (Grace)

Seven shared children described how school-related activities created opportunities for better understanding their family structures. Three individuals explained this well:

- I remember specifically back in school when people were being taught family trees and how people are related... I imagine my mom explained it all at that point. I don't remember having a full sit-down conversation, but I think it was just one of those things where she was like, 'Nope, that's your half-sibling' or 'that's your full sibling' or, you know, 'these are mom's kids, and these are dad's kids,' so I was able to see how it all combines. (Tammy)
- I was in elementary school, probably like in first grade. I think it came up because of the school activities when they ask you to draw your family and stuff. You know, "how many siblings do you have?" and stuff like that. So that made me think more about it, and it caused me to ask my parents about it. I remember wanting to figure it out because I knew it wasn't typical. (Sarah)
- I knew that he [half-brother] had a different dad, but I didn't think much about it until we were in school and they were talking about like family trees and genealogy and half-siblings and stepsiblings stuff like that. I went home and asked my mom "so Trevor would be my half-brother?" And she was like, "No. No. He is your brother." And it was very "end-of-discussion," you know, very matter-of-fact... I think she wanted to make sure that he [Trevor] felt like he was part of our family and didn't feel like an outsider. (Amanda)

Amanda's story illustrates family privacy regulation well; her mother set a clear communication boundary that asking or talking about Trevor as a half-sibling would not

be tolerated. Similarly, six other shared children described privacy regulation surrounding information about family relatedness; their parents purposefully withheld information about family structure and relatedness, seemingly with the thought that this knowledge would threaten the quality of the sibling relationships or threaten their image as a nuclear family. This was likely to happen when half-siblings' other biological parent was uninvolved in their upbringings, and parents' attempts to reorganize as a nuclear unit meant omitting the information that half-siblings were, in fact, half-siblings. Grace, whose biological father adopted her older half-sister before Grace was born, explained:

My family tried to make that seem invisible, like “No, you guys are not half. Even though you’re half-siblings, it’s not the case, you guys are blood. Don’t call her your half-sister, like that’s your sister... They never wanted us to look at each other as half-siblings... they just want us to just be all a happy family and they don’t want it to be where it’s like we’re broken up or we came from different pieces. They just want us all just to be one piece.

Similarly, Emily’s parents intentionally withheld the information that her sister, who was adopted by Emily’s father, was her half-sister. She recalled the moment when she learned the truth about their family structure:

When I was 6 or 7, me and my brother, Mitch, were out to lunch with my step-grandma and she was like, “Yeah, your dad adopted Nancy, she’s not [your biological sister] ... me and Mitch went home, and we were so distraught, we just started crying... I was like “No, she’s my sister.” It was hard to hear... I kept thinking “Does Nancy know? And why weren’t we told?” It was just like, why was everybody left in the dark?... I don’t think they [parents] wanted to tell us

‘cause they didn’t want us to think of her anything less than a sister... I don’t think my parents talked to her [stepgrandmother] for years after that. (Emily)

Consistently throughout interviews, shared children seemed to be making educated guesses, or hypothesizing, as to why their parents purposefully withheld information about family relatedness. They suspected these privacy rules were to preserve family cohesiveness – to be a “happy family,” “in one piece” (Grace) and to prevent older half-siblings “feel[ing] like family outsiders” (Amanda). Reorganizing and identifying as a nuclear family, therefore, meant omitting information that would threaten this image, such as the fact that half-siblings had one different biological parent. For shared children, these privacy rules could stall or complicate the process of figuring out family relatedness.

However, when older half-siblings’ other biological parent *was* a part of their lives (i.e., they spent time together at least every other week), the process of understanding family relatedness was generally smoother for shared children. The presence or involvement of half-siblings’ other biological parent served as a catalyst for prompting shared children to think about their relations to their half-siblings. One participant explained that when her half-brother would visit his biological father when she was young, her mom would say, “Your brother is going to see his dad.” She said, “That would confuse me...I didn’t know why she was saying ‘*his* dad.’ So I knew that there was another person in there... That’s probably how I started to understand our family situation.” Similarly, Tori shared, “I think I grew up knowing that they [half-siblings] had a different mom because they were with her some of the time, and Laura [half-sister] talks with her a lot...so I knew they were my half-siblings.”

In addition, six shared children with maternal half-siblings said that having a different last name from their half-siblings cued them to the fact that they were not fully biologically related. Emily shared, “When we got older, we started picking up on the fact that he [half-brother] had a different last name.” Similarly, Alex explained, “I don’t remember when I figured that out, but I know that I was aware of it in elementary school because he had a different last name than me.” Ben said, “I probably started thinking about it more when I was a little bit older, probably like 11 or 12, just how they [half-sisters] didn’t have the ‘Davis’ name, and how they were half-sisters as opposed to, like, regular sisters.”

### **Learning Family Histories**

The second component phenomenon of shared children’s lived experience involved a gradual and intricate process of learning family histories. Shared children, by definition, have at least one parent who had children in previous marriages or intimate partnerships. Therefore, the ‘nuclear’ family that the shared child is born into is a higher-order family – one that is formed after a history of divorce or separation and remarriage. Learning about this family history, and understanding the dynamics that developed as a result of this history, was a phenomenon that surfaced throughout shared children’s interviews.

The process of learning family histories and dynamics was made easier or harder by the degree of openness or closedness in family communication boundaries. Participants’ families varied in the extent to which the boundaries were open or closed (i.e., the extent to which information about family histories and dynamics was revealed or concealed). Although some families openly shared or discussed information about prior

divorces, remarriages, and resulting relational dynamics, more often, participants described unspoken but understood family rules surrounding which topics were okay to discuss, and which topics should be avoided. For instance, when asked about her father's divorce from his first wife and the ensuing custody battle that her half-siblings experienced, Tori replied, "I honestly don't know a whole lot about it... We don't talk about it. It just seems kind of like a taboo topic in our house." Similarly, Amanda knew little about her mother's first marriage:

I don't know much about Tom [mother's ex-husband] at all. They never really talked about it...I would get little snippets of information here and there, but that's it. I feel like [that marriage] is just a blotch on my mom's past that she doesn't like to discuss.

Designating certain topics off-limits seemed to be a privacy regulation strategy for managing the tension that resulted from the family's attempt to reorganize as a nuclear unit within a stepfamily structure. In other words, under some conditions, closed communication boundaries helped preserve the nuclear family image. For instance, two participants had older half-siblings who attempted to reconnect with their other biological parent; however, this was a topic that was seldom discussed among family members. It seemed to threaten their status quo as a nuclear family in ways that made shared children (and their parents) uncomfortable. For instance, when Amanda's half-brother was making attempts to reconnect with his biological father and would come back from a weekend visit with his dad, Amanda said:

No one ever brought it up. It's weird because I never questioned it back then, but now that I think about it, it's weird that we didn't ask him [how his time was with

his dad]. You know, no one said, ‘Tell us the things you did!’ We just kind of moved on with life.

Disrupting the status quo of nuclear family functioning seemed to be a reason for avoiding certain topics or conversations in Sarah’s family as well:

My mom always wanted her own biological child and her own nuclear family, and she really didn’t want these extra players around....[So] we don’t really talk about this other time in his life, like the chapter before me and my mom ...probably because my dad knows that my mom wouldn’t appreciate it.

Emily also demonstrated avoidance of topics that disrupted the nuclear identity of her family:

Still to this day I have never had a conversation with Nancy about her not being my dad’s [biological daughter]. We’ve never actually talked about it... and we’re really close, too, so I think it’s weird [that we don’t talk about it], but I don’t want to bring it up ’cause I feel awkward about it.

*Why* was discussing these topics uncomfortable for some family members? It was difficult for many shared children to answer this question. It seemed that these were family communication rules they had learned over time, and when asked to reflect on what would happen if they violated these rules, their discomfort often was visible. Kay said “I have so many unanswered questions, but I don’t know that I’d ever want to ask...I don’t know why, why I’m so nervous. I just feel, I, I don’t know. I, I don’t know.” Emily showed a similar level of discomfort when reflecting on her mother’s marriage to her half-siblings’ father, about which she knew little. Although she knew that her mother’s first husband died by suicide she did not know the circumstances, including how old her

siblings were or whether her mother was married to or divorced from her first husband at the time of his passing. She explained:

I only know information about that from when I would overhear my mom on the phone with other relatives. She has never actually sat down and told us about him. I wonder all the time, but it's so uncomfortable to me. Like I want to ask him [half-brother] and my mom, but I'd rather just keep my mouth shut than be awkward...My mom's not the type person to share things, like she's very closed off, so she doesn't like to talk about it...I guess she tries to save us from that, but I don't, I don't know. It's just weird.

Two participants said that they took it upon themselves to learn more about their family histories, including parents' previous marriages and half-siblings' upbringings. Rather than ask their parents directly though, they used photographs to elucidate their understanding. One of these participants shared:

I recently dug out a bunch of old photos and it was really interesting to see, especially like family vacation photos of them [half-siblings] and their mom and my dad... In a lot of the photos, he [dad] was in his early 20s, so he was this strapping young man, and I'm just used to this old guy that's in his 70s, because he was 45 when I was born. So it's almost like an outsider's view into your own family, you know, like seeing through a looking glass to see him in this whole other lifetime with young kids on a family vacation.

Kirsten was a counter example of closed communication boundaries when it came to her father's first marriage. She seemed comfortable talking about her half-brother's biological mother – likely a result of amicable post-divorce coparenting relationships:

My dad is a very genuine person, so even though he divorced someone, he never holds grudges. Last year Laurie's [ex-wife's] mom passed away, and my dad was still involved in that. You know, talking to the boys, talking to Laurie, making sure everyone's okay, and like sending flowers to Laurie and to her mother's funeral.... I've actually met Laurie before. I've gone over to her house ... We were up in Iowa and Matt and Shane [half-brothers] were with us, and they wanted to go see their mom. Dad had no problems going to visit her. I mean, she's just a friend... It was just more of a "It didn't work out" type thing. Mom has no problems with Laurie either... Like we still have things in the house [from their marriage], because it is a part of Dad's life, and it doesn't offend Mom because it's a thing of the past, but it's still part of Dad's life.

Of course, the extent to which shared children knew about their parents' previous marriages or their half-siblings' upbringings (i.e., the extent to which communication boundaries were open or closed) existed on a continuum. One participant described boundaries that seemed to be more along the middle of this continuum:

I've heard little tidbits [about dad's previous marriages] along the way, little bits from my dad every now and then, little bits from my mom, and then some from Kevin and Debbie [half-siblings]...for instance, I know how his wife passed away; they were unloading something from a vehicle and she slipped and fell from the vehicle onto the pavement and hit her head...I know that his second wife married him thinking that she was gonna have a nice cushy life cause he owned his own business and was doing well, but I guess she didn't realize he was a penny pincher so they divorced a year later. I don't know. It's like there's just

little things here and there. Mom's mentioned some stories. Yeah. I don't know.

It's just little things drop here and there.

### **Understanding Family Dynamics**

In addition to learning about family histories, shared children's lived experiences included the process of understanding the family dynamics that developed from these histories. Specifically, the stepparent-stepchild relationships in participants' families (i.e., the relationships between their older half-siblings and the other biological parent, the half-siblings' stepparent) were consistently identified as major forces that influenced family dynamics. However, learning about the development of these ties was not always easy, particularly when stepparent-stepchild relationships were strained. In the same way that shared children described closed communication boundaries surrounding discussion of their parents' marital histories, some also experienced closed communication boundaries surrounding stepparent-stepchild issues. As a result, participants grew up with 'family secrets.' For instance, Ben had two half-sisters from his mother's first marriage. His half-sisters and his father did not speak, but he was unsure why:

I'm not sure what happened, but something definitely did... My dad is not very open or kind, so I haven't really asked or dug too deep. He just kind of tells me that he doesn't care for them, doesn't want them to be something that's big in my life. I'm not sure the reasons behind it.

Grace shared a similar scenario:

She [half-sister] and my dad actually had a patch where they weren't getting along. I don't know what happened between them because they never talk about

it. Even to this day, like after that moment, if that had something to do with why she kind of just veered away from the family.

Sean had a particularly contentious family situation. His father and his maternal half-brother, R.J., did not get along. Sean described:

They have a strained relationship...my dad has a temper and my brother has a temper, so they would get into these huge arguments. R.J. was always the scapegoat for my dad's anger and frustration...I think the fact that he wasn't the biological child of my father put a lot of strain on their relationship, which then spilled over into other relationships, like between me and my dad, or my mom and my dad, and everyone else in the family.

As illustrated here, shared children were in a difficult position when their parents and half-siblings did not get along. Biologically related to all parties, shared children wanted family members to get along – Jake described himself as the “link between everyone in the family” – so it made shared children uncomfortable if they felt pressured to choose sides. When asked how he felt about the rift between his dad and his sisters, Ben replied, “It sucks. I’m almost always in the middle. I don’t really try to pick sides...but it doesn’t make me feel good having to go around with sides being split in between.” Sean also tried not to choose sides, but because he did not want his half-brother to be kicked out of the house for fighting with his dad (which happened frequently), Sean admitted, “Seeing my dad and my brother get in such heated arguments, in the back of my head I was always like ‘I hope my brother wins this one. I hope he doesn’t have to leave again.’”

Here too, a lack of communication surrounding these family dynamics made it difficult for shared children to make sense of them. Sean, hypothesizing, suspected that closed communication boundaries helped preserve the nuclear family image that his mother desperately wanted, though he realized that this lack of communication was unhealthy:

I never talked with my mom about it. She didn't like talking about problems in our family. She was in the whole, you know, 'white picket fences, perfect home, nothing's wrong with us' kind of mindset. She didn't want to confront the idea that our family had issues, more than other families... There would be times when the noncommunication would start to boil, you know, if you leave the kettle on the stove too long, it's going to boil over. But if I tried to talk to my parents about things, they'd pretend that it wasn't a problem.

In contrast, Calli's open family communication made the process of understanding family dynamics easier, even when those dynamics were difficult. Like other shared children, she identified the stepparent-stepchild relationship in her family (i.e., the relationship between her biological mother and paternal half-siblings) as salient to her lived experience. Also similar to other shared children, she felt caught in the middle when stepparent-stepchild ties were strained. Unlike other shared children, however, Calli's parents spoke openly with her about these dynamics and helped her understand them. She recalled one example:

When my sister's prom was coming up, I remember my mom kept asking, "Hey, so are you going to prom?" My sister was like, "Yeah, I want to go, but I don't have a dress." And my mom, not wanting to step on Mary's [sister's biological

mother's] toes said, "Okay, well, like is your mom going to take you dress shopping? You know, if she doesn't want to, that's totally fine. I'll take you." And it kept getting closer and closer to prom, and her mom still hadn't taken her, and she could tell my sister was upset about it, so my mom was like "Okay, I'll take you then." So they went dress shopping, and the whole time my sister was just throwing a fit and being so mean to my mom and calling my mom names and stuff...It really upset me because I felt like my mom was always trying to do the right thing...My mom [explained], "I know she wasn't actually mad at me. She just wanted her mom to be doing it, not me." She always took the approach of, "We're going to talk it out, even if it's hard. We're going to talk about our feelings."

### **Assessing Half-sibling Relationship Quality**

Finally, shared children reflected on the extent to which their family structure impacted the quality of relationships with older half-siblings. First, in assessing half-sibling relationship quality, shared children considered age differences between themselves and half-siblings. Because it took time for parents to divorce from their first spouses, meet their second spouses, and have children with those partners, there were usually relatively large age gaps between half-siblings. The average age difference between half-siblings was 9.7 years, with a range of 4-15 years. The older that half-siblings were when shared children were born, the less time they shared in the household together. As a result, some shared children, even while describing their relationships with their half-siblings as close, said that those relationships resembled family ties more characteristic of extended family bonds due to the generational age gaps, especially when

they were young. Jake said, “She [half-sister] was sort of a mother figure when I was an infant, you know, helping take care of me and babysitting and stuff.” Tammy described:

I grew up with Kevin and Debbie in more of like an aunt and uncle role, even though they’re my brother and sister, and then their kids were more like cousins, even though we’re their aunts and they’re our nieces and nephews...I knew they were my siblings, but they were adults and I was a kid...so it didn’t feel like the [sibling relationships] that I saw my friends have...It was just a different dynamic.

When half-siblings were closer in age, shared children generally described closer relationships. This also was true when they had more than one older half-sibling; shared children were more likely to say that they were closer to the younger of their older half-siblings than the older, primarily because there was more shared history from having spent more time in the household together.

Next, gender operated in different ways. Some shared children said that having same-gender half-siblings facilitated closer relationships. Others said that having same-gender half-siblings created greater competition. Emily was an example of the former. She used both age and gender to explain why she was closer to her half-sister than her half-brother:

Nick and I don’t have a close relationship because he is older. Nick and I are 10 years apart, so we had no overlap [in the household]. He’s a boy and he’s way older, but me and Nancy are both girls. Mitch and Nick have a better relationship because they’re both boys and they like beer and stuff, but Nancy and I go out and hang out with each other all the time.

In contrast, Josie was closer to her half-brother than her half-sister. She suspected that gender created competition and jealousy with her half-sister:

Our relationship has always been tense. She was just plain mean to me. I think she was always kind of jealous that dad had another girl after her, because she had been the baby until I came along...I remember one time, so my dad calls his daughters 'Sis,' and one time we were all at home, and he said 'Sis,' and both of us responded, like 'Yeah?' And she just looked at me like I was the worst thing in the world.

Above and beyond demographic characteristics such as age or gender, larger family dynamics shaped shared children's relationships with their half-siblings. Their lived experiences included the sometimes emotionally taxing process of understanding why relationships with half-siblings had developed as they had. When relationships were distant, this process could be uncomfortable. For instance, some hypothesized that older half-siblings resented having a more difficult upbringing than the shared child(ren), and this resentment negatively impacted relationship quality:

- I think she's always been upset that she didn't grow up with her mom and dad living together...I think that's always been the root of her problem with me, because I was part of this new family that she never wanted to exist. (Sarah)
- My sister was moody, always wanted me to leave her alone, you know, so I kind of learned when I could interact with her and when I couldn't... What I know now is that she was just really jealous of the situation, that I was raised by our father and she wasn't... I feel bad for them [half-siblings] because it's not fair. They should have had the same experiences that I had. I mean, he was a great dad to

me. He played with me (laughs). He was like the best dad ever, for me... I openly admit my dad did not step up and he was not a good dad to his other children, but it was out of my control all the way through. It wasn't my fault. So maybe it's a matter of resenting my dad, and that's fine, but don't punish me for it... It hurts really bad, which is why I'm still emotional. (Kay)

- I think about the bitterness, but then also the guilt ...with my dad's two kids, there was always a bit of bitterness there towards us [participant and biological sister]. There's still that slight undertone because, you know, they [half-siblings] lost their mom young, so they had to go through a lot more than my sister and me. The other thing is that my dad is very cheap. You know, throws pennies at things and that's it. We didn't get AC in my house until I was a senior in high school. But we [participant and sister] always had just slightly more than what they [half-siblings] did as kids. You know, I don't think it's my fault that I had things a bit easier than the older kids did. It's not my fault, but I do appreciate that they had a tougher life, so I don't try to be a brat about it, saying "Oh, yeah, I did get more than you" ... but you do feel a bit of guilt about it. (Tammy)

Shared children in this position vacillated between understanding they were not at fault and feeling guilt about their privilege. Much of their interviews were spent reflecting on, understanding, and dissecting the resentment they felt from their older half-siblings. Not all shared children empathized and understood the complex upbringings of their half-siblings, though. Some shared children were seemingly unaware of how their half-siblings' difficult journeys may have impacted their feelings or relationships. For instance, Grace's half-sister, Vanessa, was born in the Cape Verde Islands and had to

move to the United States when her mother met her stepfather when she was 10. The move severed her relationship with her father as well as her maternal and paternal extended family. It seemed likely that these familial and geographic transitions could have affected Vanessa's reactions to her mother's remarriage, but Grace gave minimal thought to how or why this may have played a role in what developed to be a contentious relationship between them. In attempting to identify the origin of their strained relationship, Grace hypothesized:

Maybe it's because our backgrounds are so different, or maybe she's f\*\*\*ed up about her dad or something and that's why we don't get along. I don't, I don't know, I can never figure out what it is. Me and her just don't click.

Similarly, Emily was not close to her half-brother, whose father had passed away when he was a child. Emily suspected that his father's death played a role in why their relationship was distant:

I feel like Nick has never really been involved in our family. I think he's a very angry person about how things have played out. I think since his dad died, he was just messed up. Because he knew his dad and had memories with him and stuff, and then he killed himself, so it was like well, he probably had questions about that, like 'Why would he leave me?' and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, you know. I think he's just hurt and messed up. I don't know. I don't understand him.

Shared children like Grace and Emily believed that agency lay with older half-siblings when it came to steering the development of half-sibling ties. Jake, who had close relationships with his older half-siblings, believed this as well:

Those relationships are really a product of how the [older] half-siblings feel towards the [younger] half-sibling more than the other way around. Because it can go either way; they [older half-siblings] can choose to accept the situation and treat the [shared child] as a normal sibling, or they can choose to not accept it and not be a part of the family. It's really in their hands.

Shared children thought that certain conditions made it easier for their older half-siblings to "accept the situation." Specifically, older half-siblings were more integrated into the "step-nuclear" family when (a) they were younger at the time of the shared biological parent's remarriage (and had fewer memories of life before the remarriage), or (b) post-divorce coparenting relationships were civil, or better, amicable. Under these conditions, shared children's relationships with their older half-siblings were closer. The extent to which older half-siblings were included in the 'inner family circle' (i.e., the extent to which 'reorganizing' as a nuclear unit included half-siblings) was central to shared children's lived experiences. Although shared children recognized the ways in which their older half-siblings held agency in the trajectory of relationship quality, participants also indicated that their parents were largely responsible for drawing the boundaries of family membership. Sean described how, in his family, boundaries were drawn around the nuclear unit and excluded his older half-brother:

I think he was definitely, even when he was living with us, like if you were to draw a Venn diagram, he'd be in that gray area, like kind of overlapping but not really... When they [parents] would make him leave, in their anger, they would try to make us think of him differently. They'd make it seem like he wasn't really one of us. They'd say, you know, 'He's not really part of the family.' They would tell

us not to call him. They just really tried to restrict [access to him] ...they kept him in this gray area, like he wasn't a permanent fixture in our family.

Sarah's biological mother (her half-siblings' stepmother), drew similar family boundaries:

Growing up, I always felt like I had a nuclear family. My mom always tried to make it feel like it was just the three of us [mom, dad, and shared child], like we were a team, and then these other players [older half-siblings] would sort of come and go.

In contrast, Calli credited her family experience to her parents' ability to bring everyone together. In particular, she spoke highly of her mother's commitment to being a devoted stepmom to her half-siblings and why that impacted the family dynamic:

I never felt like that they [half-siblings] were excluded or were a separate part of the family. My mom and dad tried to make it so that we all did everything together, all seven of us. It wasn't like 'Okay, here's my mom's stepkids, and then there's us.' When I was growing up I think my mom wanted us to know that because she'd say, you know, "They aren't just my stepkids, like those are my kids, and I love them the same amount as I love you and Ian." ...So, for my whole life, I would explain "Oh, I'm like one of five kids." I'm sure there are families where it's like you're not very close with your half-siblings, but for me, they're my siblings. I don't feel any differently towards them than I do towards my little brother [who] I share the same two parents [with].... So I don't feel like it's a stepfamily, but I wouldn't consider it to be like a nuclear family either - something in between.

## CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

These findings shed light on the life-world and lived experiences of shared children in (step)families. Interest in this population is growing; researchers have found that shared children score lower than other groups of siblings on a variety of outcomes, including educational attainment, economic well-being, anti-social behavior, and depressive symptoms (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Brown, Manning, & Stykes, 2015; Ginther & Pollak, 2004; Halpern-Meekin & Tach, 2008; Harcourt, Adler-Baeder, Erath, & Pettit, 2015; Strow & Strow, 2008; Tillman, 2008). The reasons underlying these findings, however, are unknown. This study provides insight to the lives of shared children and offers potential explanations for why they may be at higher risk for developmental outcomes than other groups of siblings.

Shared children's life-worlds are complex. Though they appear to live in nuclear families on the surface, their lives and experiences are shaped by dynamics characteristic of divorced and remarried families. As Calli described, they do not quite live in stepfamilies, but they really do not live in nuclear families either – their reality is “something in between.” The contradictions embedded within this hybrid structure shape their upbringings.

Russian language philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), in his theory of *dialogism*, proposed that social life is characterized by the unity of opposing tendencies. Relationships (and families) are not characterized by fixed harmony and symmetry, but by the unity of opposites (i.e., contradiction). Contradiction refers to the “simultaneous opposing demands or ‘pulls’ that constitute the relationship” (Baxter et al., 2004, p. 448).

The study of contradiction in relationships and families assumes a “both-and” approach rather than an “either-or” logic. Baxter and colleagues (2004) described:

An ‘either–or’ logic emphasizes differences as mutually exclusive possibilities; if X is present, Y is absent or at least diminished. By contrast, a ‘both–and’ dialogic asks about the simultaneity of both X *and* Y. Of course, given the competing, oppositional nature of X and Y, their simultaneity results in a tension-filled indeterminacy of meanings in which neat and tidy outcome choices of X *or* Y are theoretically foreclosed (p. 449).

In many ways, shared children’s life-world context and family experiences are characterized by the unity of opposites. They experience both X *and* Y because of their unique family structure. Their life-world contexts are contradictory largely due to the oppositional nature of cultural messages attached to nuclear families and stepfamilies. Societal values that celebrate and support nuclear families clash with those that marginalize and stigmatize divorced families and stepfamilies (Cherlin, 1978). Because shared children live in *both* these family structures at once, their life-world contexts are contradictory and complex. Additionally, their family experiences are characterized by the unity of opposites. For example, they live with stepparents but do not have stepparents. They have parents who are divorced, but they do not have “divorced parents.” These contradictions manifest in complicated ways; shared children are exposed to nonresidential parents, stepfamily dynamics, coparenting relationships, and more, even though they are not central to or involved in these operations.

### **Family Privacy Regulation**

Perhaps it is because of this complexity that privacy is regulated so carefully in

shared children's families. That the overriding phenomenon of participants' experiences was *regulating family privacy boundaries* was an unexpected finding. Petronio's (2004) theory of communication privacy management (CPM) provides a useful interpretive lens. Petronio argued that managing private information is a major challenging task that families face, as it involves "both the management of information among family members across internally constructed privacy boundaries and the flow or protection of private information to those outside the larger family privacy boundary" (2010, p. 176). Indeed, members of step-nuclear families seem to be grappling with the place of privacy in family life as they make decisions about revealing or concealing information, and the regulation of privacy boundaries between family insiders and family outsiders appear interconnected. Shared children who describe closed boundaries of internal family communication also describe parents who are committed to the maintenance of a nuclear family image to family outsiders. Ironically, efforts to conceal information or safeguard family secrets seem to add to the family complexity rather than reduce it. As Petronio (2010) described, "In many ways, privacy appears paradoxical, thus making the choices to grant or deny access more complex" (p. 175).

The component phenomena reveal that there are a number of topics around which privacy boundaries exist in shared children's families. Within the phenomenon "figuring out family relatedness," privacy rules exist surrounding information about how family members are connected to one another (e.g., that half-siblings have another biological parent). Within "learning family histories," secrets exist surrounding parents' marriages, divorces, ex-spouses, and the experiences of older half-siblings' family structure transitions. "Understanding family dynamics" is difficult because of closed

communication boundaries around topics such as stepparent-stepchild conflict; shared children may grow up households in which a parent and half-sibling do not communicate, but they do not know why – an awkward and uncomfortable position for the shared child who feels linked to all parties. Topic avoidance also affects their ability to “assess half-sibling relationship quality.” Some shared children question if their half-siblings resent them, which is a painful experience. Tissues were used liberally when half-siblings grappled with issues of privilege and vocalized thoughts that they did not share with family members.

The prevalence of privacy boundaries is clear, but the purpose of these boundaries is less clear. Why are certain topics avoided or certain information concealed? Some shared children point to individual personality traits of their parents (e.g., “My dad is not very open” [Ben]; “My mom’s not the type of person to share things” [Emily]). Others suggest that controlling information helps preserve family cohesiveness or protects the quality of kin relationships. *Why*, though, is certain information perceived as threatening to familial closeness? As Petronio (2010) explained, “People dictate the flow of information [when] there are risks if others acquire that information” (p. 197). In other words, privacy rules do not exist by accident – they are constructed to serve some purpose.

### **Nuclear Family Ideologies**

Dominant cultural messages about family life shape the ways in which individuals “do family” (i.e., construct and define family roles and relationships through interaction). Though families are increasingly complex, the family structure that continues to be most supported, recognized, and revered in North American culture is that of the traditional,

nuclear family, characterized by two first-married, different-sex parents and their shared biological children (Allen, Lloyd, & Few, 2009; Smith, 1993; Zartler, 2014). Smith (1993) called this the Standard North American Family (SNAF) and argued that it represents the quintessential version of American kinship.

The nuclear family ideology appears to drive privacy regulation in shared children's families. It seems that parents (and other family members) establish communication boundaries to reduce family complexity and maintain a nuclear family image. The openness or closedness of these boundaries exists on a continuum:

In certain cases, there is a high need for control over the privacy boundaries where the boundary walls are thick, and the flow of information outward is limited. High control needs result in establishing impermeable, dense boundaries to protect the information. This kind of information reflects what is commonly referred to as a secret because the access is so restricted that very few, if any, gain a right to know (Petronio, 2010, p. 179).

Privacy boundaries appear thickest when a piece of information has the greatest potential to disrupt the nuclear family identity. For instance, when half-siblings' other biological parent is not involved, and the family can 'pass' as a nuclear family, information about family relatedness (i.e., that siblings are *half*-siblings) is the most tightly regulated. Under these conditions, shared children are likely to have distinct memories of when they learned the truth about their family structure. Even when family relatedness is not a secret, though, boundaries around topics that challenge the nuclear family identity exist. Shared children know little about their parents' prior marriages and divorces, and they seem shielded from information about the complexities of stepparent-

stepchild ties in their families. Nuclear family ideologies may discourage open communication about topics related to divorce, remarriage, or stepfamilies.

Additionally, shared children demonstrate nuclear family ideologies in the language they use to think about and describe half-sibling relationships. They consider their half-siblings to be kin, and they reject the prefix “half-.” Intellectually, they understand that the label “half-siblings” is a way in which social scientists differentiate sibling relationships based on genes that are shared between them, but emotionally, they are generally resistant to (even defensive about) a label that suggests the relationship is anything less than fully familial. Of course, it is important to note that shared children in this sample were required to have spent at least some time with their half-siblings growing up. It is possible (indeed, likely) that shared children with nonresidential half-siblings attribute different meaning to this prefix. For shared children who shared a household with half-siblings growing up, however, nuclear family ideologies seem to contribute to their rejection of this label, which they perceive to be indicative of a relationship that lacks in closeness, familiarity, and warmth. This finding poses challenges to researchers who study half- and stepsiblings; it is critical that researchers are sensitive to the ways in which kinship is socially constructed, particularly within complex families. Recruitment advertisements, for instance, should reflect the family realities of potential participants. In this study, for instance, the ad read: [A] team of researchers is interested in speaking with you about your relationships with your half- or stepsiblings [*even if you think of them as brothers and sisters, or if you don't think of them as family at all*].

## Practical Implications

The findings from this study yield practical implications. One of the more striking aspects of this study was the extent to which some shared children feel caught in the middle of family conflict, particularly between stepparents and stepchildren. As the *shared* children, they are biologically linked to all parties, and it is incredibly difficult for them to feel torn between parents and siblings. A sizeable body of literature has explored feeling caught in the middle between divorced parents (e.g., Afifi, 2003; Amato & Afifi, 2006; Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Schrodtt & Afifi, 2007), but shared children also seem uniquely positioned to this phenomenon, even while living with married biological parents. Parents should consider the extent to which their relationships with their stepchildren are affecting their children's ability to develop warm and supportive relationships with their older half-siblings. Parents play a pivotal role in encouraging those ties, and when they have warm relationships with their stepchildren, their children are likely to feel closer to their half-siblings.

Towards that end, parents should be mindful of drawing family boundaries that are inclusive of older half-siblings. It is possible that parents feel they are reducing family complexity by drawing boundaries around the 'inner most family circle,' but doing so is likely to undermine half-sibling relationship quality and potentially foster feelings of resentment on behalf of older half-siblings.

Parents can help in other ways too, such as assisting shared children in the process of figuring out family relatedness. Unlike their older half-siblings, shared children have to solve a slowly-revealed puzzle about family history, connections between family

members, and the roles of family “outsiders” who nonetheless are related to half-siblings (e.g., half-siblings’ nonresidential parents). They are not given all of the puzzle pieces at once and are not assisted much by parents in solving the puzzle. Perhaps this is because family history and kin-connections are not a mystery to anyone else in the family, or perhaps it is because nuclear family ideologies prevent parents from sharing this history with shared children. Either way, more open communication with shared children surrounding family histories and connections is likely to reduce the confusion they experience in figuring these things out for themselves.

Finally, parents may want to consider the positive ramifications of normalizing the prefix “half.” Shared children have strong reactions to labels they perceive as stigmatizing, and these reactions are likely learned from parents. Children take cues from parents when it comes to the use of family language, and destigmatizing these labels may be liberating for family members living in complex family constellations.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

There are limitations of this study. First, because participants were recruited through e-advertisements at a university, the sample consists of college students and university employees who have been relatively successful in their lives thus far. Given that interest in this topic derived in part from findings that shared children are at greater risk to struggle (e.g., academically, socially) compared to their counterparts, a more diverse sample from different educational and socioeconomic backgrounds might provide more insights into the range of experiences in shared children’s lives. In addition, the sample lacks gender diversity (three-quarters of participants were women) and greatly lacks racial and ethnic diversity (all but three participants were White). In a recent

exploration of African American mothers, Dow (2016) found evidence of cultural expectations that challenged dominant hegemonic ideologies of family and motherhood. In other words, because life-world contexts are contingent upon culture, the ways in which individuals “do family” varies across cultures. Because family experiences are inextricably linked to the life-world contexts in which they are situated, shared children from various racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds are likely to experience being a shared child differently. Future research should investigate these differences through a culturally diverse lens.

It is also important to note this study included the purposive eligibility criterion of having shared a household with half-siblings for at least some time growing up. Many shared children, however, do not share a residence with their older half-siblings. Research on nonresidential half-sibling relationships is virtually nonexistent, but there are likely valuable questions to be answered regarding nonresidential half-sibling ties. For instance, some individuals who expressed interest in this study but did not meet our inclusion criteria were those who learned of the existence of their half-siblings in adolescence or adulthood and were slowly developing familial relationships over time. Explorations of topics like this would be welcomed additions to the sibling literature.

Additionally, research is needed on the perspectives of older half-siblings. Shared children in this study spent a lot of time hypothesizing about the feelings of their older half-siblings (e.g., how they felt about family structure transitions or the birth of younger half-siblings) but talking to older half-siblings themselves seems like the logical next step in filling out our collective understanding of half-siblings’ experiences and relationships.

Finally, I would encourage researchers to use these findings to inform measurement selection in quantitative investigations of shared children. Adding measures of family dynamics that appear to be prevalent in shared children's lives (e.g., "feeling caught" between conflict, feeling guilty about privilege, feeling frustrated with lack of familial communication) may help unpack the question mark surrounding *why* shared children fare worse than other groups of siblings on a variety of outcomes. At the same time, it is critical to implement research designs that ask questions pertaining to resilience and functionality in (step)nuclear families. Focusing on the negative outcomes at the expense of the positive ones further perpetuates the deficit-perspective that is all too often used in stepfamily research. Rather, I would advocate for the use of the *normative-adaptive perspective* in studying shared children's experiences (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). While this perspective does not deny the possibility of problems in stepfamilies or attempt to mask stepfamily challenges, it does seek to avoid focusing solely on the negative dimensions of (step)family life by shedding light on both the positive *and* negative experiences. Better understanding the experiences of shared children without further stigmatizing the complexity of their life-worlds is a crucial step moving forward.

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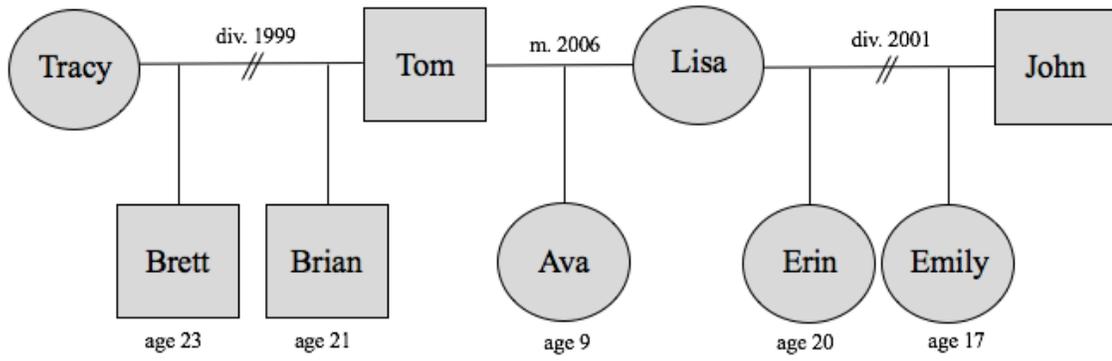
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TABLE

Name	Age	Sex	Race	# of Full Siblings	# of Maternal Half-siblings	# of Paternal Half-siblings
Grace	23	F	African American	1 (M)	1 (F)	0
Ben	21	M	Caucasian	0	2 (F,F)	0
Alex	30	F	Caucasian	0	1 (M)	0
Jake	30	M	Caucasian	0	0	2 (F,M)
Kirsten	25	F	Caucasian	2 (F,M)	0	2 (M,M)
Tammy	30	F	Caucasian	1 (F)	2 (M,M)	2 (M,F)
Tori	20	F	Caucasian	0	0	2 (F,M)
Kay	28	F	African American	0	0	3 (M,F,M)
Sean	25	M	Caucasian	3 (F,M,F)	1 (M)	0
Amanda	28	F	Caucasian	1 (F)	1 (M)	0
Josie	28	F	Caucasian	0	1 (F)	7 (F,M,F,M,F,M,F)
Calli	24	F	Caucasian	1 (M)	0	3 (M,F,M)
Sarah	27	F	Caucasian	0	0	3 (M,M,F)
Beth	19	F	Caucasian	2 (F,F)	1 (M)	0
Taylor	21	F	Hispanic	2 (F,M)	1 (M)	1 (F)
Bonnie	24	F	Caucasian	1 (F)	0	2 (F,F)
Emily	21	F	Caucasian	1 (M)	2 (M,F)	0
Tyler	22	M	Caucasian	1 (M)	0	1 (F)
Elizabeth	29	F	Caucasian	0	1 (F)	1 (F)
Jimmy	22	M	Caucasian	0	0	1 (M)

*Table 1.* Sample Description Table

FIGURE



*Figure 1.* Genogram of a shared child in a stepfamily

## APPENDICES

### *Appendix A. Participant Recruitment Ad*

Do you have a half-sibling or stepsibling?

If you answered yes, a team of researchers is interested in speaking with you about your relationship with your half- or stepsiblings (*even if you think of them as brothers and sisters, or if you don't think of them as family at all*). You will receive a \$10 Target gift card for participating. You must be above the age of 18 to participate. If interested, please contact a member of the research team via email at [cms4qc@mail.missouri.edu](mailto:cms4qc@mail.missouri.edu). Be sure to include your name and indicate your interest in the “Half/Stepsibling Study” in the email.

## *Appendix B. Consent Form*

### Half- and Stepsiblings Study

You are invited to participate in a study of half- and stepsibling relationships being conducted by Drs. Lawrence Ganong and Marilyn Coleman of the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Missouri. The purpose of this research is to better understand the lived experiences of half- and stepsiblings. If you agree to participate, you will be interviewed at least once, and maybe up to three times. Each interview will take about an hour, although the second and third may be shorter. Research assistants associated with the project may observe interviews while they take place as part of their training. In return for participation, you will receive a Mizzou Store gift card with a value of ten dollars (\$10.00) after each interview.

In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age or older. Participation in this project is completely voluntary, and there will be no negative consequences if you choose not to participate. You are free to stop participating at any time or to choose not to participate in any part of the project. There are no penalties for stopping. You are entitled to, and will retain, your compensation for participating if you choose to stop your interview at any time. The study methods have little known risks, but participation may cause you some discomfort due to the topics we will discuss. However, these risks are no greater than discussing sensitive issues with friends and family in an everyday setting. If you experience any problems as a result of participating in the study, the study will be stopped immediately and a list of supportive services will be provided to you. Should you choose to withdraw from the study at any time, your interview recording and any associated transcripts will be destroyed. You will be encouraged to contact the principal investigator (Dr. Ganong) with any problems or concerns. The benefit of participation is that you can contribute to knowledge about family relationships following divorce and remarriage. There is also a chance you will enjoy thinking about and discussing your family experiences and relationships.

All information that is obtained during the study will be kept confidential. The information you provide will be identified only by a randomly assigned number. Only the principal investigator (Dr. Ganong) will have access to the list of names of participants and corresponding identification numbers. These will be kept in a secure office.

The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed later. No names will be used in the transcribed (word processed) interviews. Data files will be stored on a password protected computer to which only authorized research personnel have access. Only the co-investigators and their research assistants will see the word processed interviews. Neither you nor anybody in your family will be identifiable from reported results. The one exception to our rule of strict confidentiality is that we are legally obligated to report allegations of child abuse and to intervene if any participant reports an intention to harm him- or herself or others.

If you agree to participate, please sign on the line below. Your signature indicates your willingness to participate. You are entitled to, and will be offered a copy of this form to keep. If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Lawrence Ganong at (573) 882-6852 or Dr. Marilyn Coleman at (573) 882-4360. Also, you may contact the University of Missouri Campus Institutional Review Board at 882-9585 with any questions about research involving human participants. Thank you!

---

Signature of Participant

---

Date

## Appendix C. Interview Protocol

### The Lived Experience of Being a Shared Child (Phenomenology)

#### A note about interviewing...

The questions listed here are meant to serve as a starting point. All interviews should follow a semi-structured format meant to elicit details about half- and stepsibling relationships. Not every question should be asked in the same order during every interview or in the same way; questions should be asked in conjunction with the flow of conversation to allow the interviewee to be as descriptive as possible. The questions listed below may sound redundant, but keep in mind that the protocol is not meant to be a rigid template. Rather, the protocol is meant to provide interviewers with a clear understanding of the relevant topics to be covered, while simultaneously encouraging interviewers to use discretion on how to best elicit the information at hand.

*\*All interviews will begin with a **family genogram** to assess family relationships. If possible, use the names of children and adults in the family, rather than terms such as “stepsibling” and “half-sibling.”*

#### Genogram Questions:

- Participant’s name & age
- Name/age/marital status of biological parents. Following this with a series of questions about the parents’ marital histories: Were they married before, and if so, for how long? Did either or both parents have children from previous relationships? If biological parents are divorced, when did they marry and divorce? Has either biological parent repartnered? If so, did stepparents have children from previous relationships? Have your biological parent and stepchildren had children together?
  - Get ages, genders, locations, marital statuses, and information about the amount of contact they have with all parents, stepparents, half-siblings, and stepsiblings.
- Growing up, who lived with you? If this varies, get info about when sibs moved in and out, or family members died, or were born, or whatever the situation was.
- Tell me about where you grew up? What was the size of the community, part of the country/geographic location, what kind of neighborhoods you lived in, tell me about housing – mobile home, apartment, duplex, house, whatever. Did you share a bedroom? If so, with whom? Tell me about that.

#### Interview Questions:

- How did you feel when you learned that one of your siblings had a different mother or father than you did? How did you learn this? Who told you, how old were you? What effect did this new information have on your relationship with your half-siblings? Did you ever talk with your half-sibling about the fact that you

were not fully biologically related? If yes, tell me about those conversations. If no, why do you think you never talked about it? How did this information affect how you thought about your older half-sib? How did this information affect how you felt about your older half-sib?

- What were the custody arrangements for your half-siblings? How much time did you spend together in the same household? How often did they transition to the other household? If/when older half-siblings were spending time at the other household, did you communicate with them during that time? Why or why not? Tell me about the nature/quality of that contact.
- Describe a “typical day” when you and your older half-sibling were together in the same household. Start with getting up in the morning and describe the day. If it helps, think about a “typical day” during the most recent year the two of you spent time in the same household.
- Now describe a “typical day” when your half-sibling was not in the household (this will only be relevant for participants with half-siblings that spent time with another residential parent). How was daily life similar or different when your stepsiblings were in the household or not? When half-siblings made transitions between households, what were those transitions like for you? How did those transitions affect your daily routine?
- What is your relationship like with your half-sibling’s other biological parent? Does your half-sibling have other half-siblings on their other side of the family? Do you ever talk to or see those individuals?
- How are holidays/birthday/milestones celebrated in your family? Who attends those events? (E.g., do you ever see your older half-siblings other biological parent at celebrations? What are those interactions like?
- What is your relationship like between your half-sibling and your mother/father who is not your half-sib’s biological parent (use first names here rather to reduce confusion). What is their stepparent-stepchild relationship like? How often do they interact with one another? What kinds of things do they do together?
- Once you became aware that your father/mother was not your half-sibling’s biological parent, did you notice that your father/mother treated your half-sibling differently than you? Can you talk about this? Give me some examples of your half-sibling being treated the same as you and some examples of them being treated differently by your parent.
- What kinds of chores/household tasks did you have to do as a child? Who enforced them? What kinds of chores/tasks did your half-sibling have to do? Did the same person make sure they did their chores?

- What kinds of activities do you do with your half-sibling(s)? Who initiates those activities? (e.g., you, your half-sibling(s), your parents, etc.)
- Describe your half-sibling [maybe ask about them as a person, as a sibling, as an acquaintance]. Here I would want to get at how they think about the person without “roles” and other social science language creeping in. Who is this person? If you had to choose 5 words to describe your half-sibling, what would those words be? (Ask them to explain why they chose the words they selected).
- What advantages (benefits, rewards) do you receive from having this person as your half-sibling? What disadvantages? How do you think he or she would answer this question about you, if I asked them the same question?
- Describe your relationship with your half-sibling. How would your half-sibling describe you?
- All siblings have disagreements from time to time. What kinds of things do you and your half-sibling disagree about? How do you resolve those disagreements?
  - In what ways did you and your half-sibling(s) differ in attitudes about school and school work? Extra-curricular activities? How are you similar to each other?
- How similar in personality were you and your half-sibling(s)? Did the similarities or differences ever cause problems in your relationship?
- When you were upset with how things were going in your family, what did you do? Did you reach out to your half-siblings? Did you withdraw from them and the family?
- Growing up, who were you closest to in your family? Who would you say your half-sibling was closest to?
  - Follow-up with questions about why specific people were closer than others
- How, if at all, have your relationships with your half-sibling(s) changed over time? Were there any emotional turning points in your relationships with your half-siblings? (e.g., an event that brought you closer together or something that drove you apart).
- Do you consider your half-sibling(s) to be family? Why or why not?
- When people ask you “How many siblings do you have?” what do you tell them?
  - (*I.e., what language do they use? Do they differentiate between biological and half-siblings (e.g., “I have one full brother and one half-brother”) or do they group siblings together (e.g., “I have two brothers.”)*)

- How, if at all, do you think your relationship with your half-sibling(s) would change if your parents were to divorce?
- Did / would you invite your half-sibling(s) to your wedding? If your parent's marriage ended, would you invite your half-sibling(s) to your wedding? Why or why not?
- How do you think your life would have been different if you did not have half-siblings?
- What kinds of things does your half-sibling do for you? What do you do for them?
- Some research suggests that children who grow up with half- or stepsiblings experience worse outcomes than children who grow up with biological siblings only. What do you think about this? What has allowed you to achieve success, despite being in this "high risk" group?

*Appendix D. Emergent Phenomena*

**Phenomena, Component Phenomena, and Intentions**

**REGULATING FAMILY PRIVACY** = Pervasive phenomenon of the lived experience

**I. FIGURING OUT FAMILY RELATEDNESS**

- a. Connecting the dots / “piecing it together”
- b. Learning about half-siblings in school
- c. Completing family trees
- d. Asking parents to explain family structure
- e. Realizing that half-siblings had another bio parent
- f. Picking up on having different last names

**II. LEARNING FAMILY HISTORIES**

- a. Seeking information about parents’ marital histories
- b. Following family communication rules
- c. Avoiding taboo topics
- d. Suppressing curiosity
- e. Overhearing “snippets of information”
- f. Learning history through photographs
- g. Maintaining nuclear family identity

**III. UNDERSTANDING FAMILY DYNAMICS**

- a. Learning about stepparent-stepchild relationships
- b. Understanding sources of conflict
- c. Avoiding choosing sides
- d. Staying connected to all family members

**IV. ASSESSING HALF-SIBLING RELATIONSHIP QUALITY**

- a. Considering age differences, gender
- b. Dissecting half-siblings’ feelings (e.g., of resentment)
- c. Empathizing with half-siblings’ upbringings (i.e., family transitions)
- d. Vacillating between feeling innocent and feeling guilt about privilege
- e. Integrating half-siblings into the step-nuclear family

## VITA

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