

CONFLICT ENGAGEMENT AND MANAGEMENT AMONG STEPSIBLINGS

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the Thesis entitled: CONFLICT ENGAGEMENT AND MANAGEMENT AMONG STEPSIBLINGS presented by Olivia Landon, a candidate for the degree of Master's of Science, and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to explore how stepsiblings engage, manage, and resolve conflicts. The processes that facilitate or impede conflict management among stepsiblings were explored. The 25 stepchildren in the sample had 71 stepsiblings, but they did not experience conflicts with all of them. Three conditions necessary for conflict to occur were: (1) opportunity (i.e., shared time, shared space, ability to interact), (2) intimacy (i.e., perceived closeness between stepsiblings, close friendship or familiarity), and (3) similarity (i.e., age, gender, or role in family). Sources of conflict included: (1) behaviors of a stepsibling, (2) violations of territory (e.g., bedrooms), (3) differential treatment by step/parents, and (4) disputes over resources. Stepsiblings used more than one conflict management strategy if the source of conflict was deemed important or if the relationship had developed to a level of intimacy in which they felt they could engage in more direct strategies. Strategies used to manage conflict among stepsiblings included both intrapersonal and interpersonal processes.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Conflict, defined as the interference of opposing values and goals between interdependent parties (Putnam & Poole, 1987), is a common phenomenon in relationships. Conflict may promote growth for individuals and relationships, or it may have negative effects (Shantz & Hartup, 1992). The purpose of this grounded theory study was to explore how stepsiblings engage, manage, and resolve conflicts. In this study the processes that facilitate or impede conflict management among stepsiblings were explored.

Stepsibling relationships are formed through a parent's remarriage or cohabitation with a person who has children from a previous relationship (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Although demographic data on the number of stepsiblings are hard to obtain, it is possible to infer from extant data that many individuals have stepsiblings. For example, in a recent U.S. national survey, in 42% of second and 44% of third romantic unions (i.e., remarriages or cohabiting relationships) both adults had children from prior relationships, thus creating stepsibling relationships (Guzzo, 2016).

What Is Known about Stepsiblings?

Unlike *full siblings* (i.e., individuals who genetically share the same mother and father), or *half-siblings* (i.e., individuals who genetically share one biological parent), *stepsiblings* are not genetically related but are linked to each other because their parents have romantically repartnered. Stepsiblings have no biological or legal connections to one another. Unlike full siblings in first-marriage families, stepsiblings are genetically and legally related to only one parent in the stepfamily household. Stepsiblings may reside together in the same household full-time, may share a residence only periodically, or they may never share a residence. As a result of the timing at which stepsiblings are gained and the custody arrangements of their respective

parents (for minor-age stepsiblings), it is possible for stepsiblings to have limited or no contact, while others could have frequent interactions daily (Ganong & Coleman, 2017).

Researchers have cautioned that findings based on full sibling dynamics (or half-siblings) may not be generalized to stepsibling relationships, due to the structural differences between stepfamilies and first marriage families, and the resulting differences between stepsiblings and siblings (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Rosenberg & Hajal, 1985; Sanner et al., 2018).

In addition, stepsibling relationships are often formed concurrently to a number of transitions, such as moving to a new household and new schools and adjusting to a new stepparent (Papernow, 2008; Rosenberg & Hajal, 1985). The transition to becoming stepsiblings is sometimes immediate, unlike other sibling types that have more gradual transitions (Rosenberg & Hajal, 1985). For example, the birth of a full or half- sibling may be celebrated with social events (e.g., baby showers, gender reveal parties) prior to the birth and anticipated for months, while the addition of a stepsibling has no designated social celebrations or rituals and may be a sudden change.

From the beginning of their stepfamilies, stepsiblings are faced with building new ties with stepsiblings, stepparents, and extended step-kin while also maintaining ongoing family bonds with siblings and parents (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Stepsiblings face numerous obstacles when attempting to develop new family relationships, such as spending limited time together, which is often the result of divergent custody arrangements. The lack of a shared family history (i.e., events overtime that develop a family's identity) is another obstacle to developing stepsibling ties (Rosenberg & Hajal, 1985). For example, stepsiblings may not be present for holiday celebrations that establish later traditions. Another potential difference in family history can be the way each stepsibling's family of origin was dissolved (e.g., divorce of parents or

death of a parent), which means that stepsiblings may have experienced quite different types of transitions prior to the stepfamily formation.

The addition of a stepparent and one or more stepsiblings, even when not sharing a residence full-time, means that the size and complexity of stepsiblings' family networks increase (Rosenberg & Hajal, 1985; Golish, 2003). In addition, a child may find themselves in a new birth order position as a result of having new stepsiblings, and this modification may require some adjusting. For instance, an only child may become one of several children when a parent remarries, or the oldest full sibling may suddenly be "in the middle."

In addition to transitional stressors when stepfamilies are newly formed, complex stepfamilies with stepsibling subsystems are more likely to experience an enduring period of heightened stress than are simple stepfamilies (i.e., all children belong to one adult only; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Stepchildren generally report experiencing greater stress than other stepfamily members because they perceive that they do not have power to influence family outcomes (Jensen et al., 2017). The additional complexity of stepfamilies with stepsibling subsystems means more people, more relationships, and more roles and system rules which contribute more potential stressors for stepchildren to manage (Ganong & Coleman, 2017).

There is limited evidence that stepchildren's adaptations to stepsiblings are influenced by age, gender (Halligan et al., 2014; Michaels, 2006; White & Reidmann, 1992), and the quality of new and existing family relationships (Ahrons, 2007; Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Ganong & Coleman, 1988; Michaels, 2006; Vogt Yuan & Hamilton, 2006). Unfortunately, few researchers have examined stepsibling relationship development (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Sanner et al., 2018). Instead, most studies of stepsiblings have focused on individual outcomes, with stepsiblings often being compared to half-siblings and always being compared to individuals

with full siblings (Sanner et al., 2018). For example, researchers have reported that stepsiblings have lower academic achievement than half- and full siblings (Case et al., 2001; Tillman, 2008), exhibit more antisocial behaviors than siblings (Fomby et al., 2016; Natsuaki et al., 2009), leave home at younger ages than siblings (Aquilino, 1991), and are more depressed (Pudrovska, 2008; Shafer et al., 2016). Research findings are not consistent, however, and many researchers have reported no differences in adjustment between stepchildren with stepsiblings and other children; for instance, stepsiblings did not differ from full siblings on educational achievement (Gennetian, 2005; Ginther & Pollack, 2004; Halpern-Meekin & Tach, 2008) and antisocial behavior (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Halpern-Meekin & Tach, 2008). Other researchers also have reported few differences between stepsiblings and full siblings on various measures of well-being, including physical well-being (Tanskanen et al., 2015), economic well-being (Brown et al., 2015), and number of friends (Bobbitt-Zeher & Downey, 2012).

A few researchers have focused on the family dynamics of stepsiblings, with mixed findings (Sanner et al., 2018). Gatins, Kinlaw, and Dunlap (2014) examined children's adjustment following the dissolution of the parental union. They combined children who had stepsiblings, half-siblings, or both, into one group and found that this group reported greater adjustment compared to children who had only full siblings. King, Boyd, and Thorsen (2015) reported no differences between adolescent stepsiblings, half-siblings and full siblings in perceptions of family belonging and relationship quality with mothers and stepfathers. Baxter (2012) reported no differences between stepsiblings and full siblings in father involvement and Stewart (2005) found no differences in parental involvement between stepsiblings and full siblings, but both studies reported that stepsiblings had more father/parental involvement than

half-siblings. Other studies have reported lower levels of family belonging for stepsiblings (Leake, 2007), and more family conflict (Campo et al., 2012; Schlomer et al., 2010).

Stepsibling relationships. The few studies about stepsibling relationship development have generally compared stepsiblings to full siblings, with mixed findings. For example, Anderson (1999) compared the relationships of full, half-, and stepsiblings and found that stepsiblings reported less rivalry, aggression, and avoidance than the other sibling types. There were no differences among the sibling types in positivity, except that stepsiblings were less directive with each other (i.e., teaching behaviors).

Mikkelson, Myers, and Hannawa (2011) compared siblings, half-siblings, and stepsiblings on how often they used relationship maintenance behaviors (i.e., positivity, openness, assurances, networks, and tasks) in adult “sibling” relationships. Stepsiblings were less likely to engage in relationship maintenance behaviors. In addition to maintenance behaviors, stepsiblings were less likely than full siblings to provide social support (Mikkelson, Floyd et al., 2011). Once again, compared to full siblings, stepsisters and stepbrothers were rated as less caring and controlling compared to their full sib counterparts (Campo et al., 2012). Comparisons of relationship quality make stepsiblings appear “less” than full siblings, without considering the inherent structural differences between the two sibling types. Differences in relationships between stepsiblings and full siblings have generally been attributed to lack of genetic relatedness (Sanner et al., 2018).

Why Study Conflict Among Stepsiblings?

Conflicts and relationship development. Interactions consisting of conflict are often perceived as negative experiences, but according to conflict theorists’ conflict is a normative event in daily life and the way it is managed is what makes it a positive or negative event

(Canary & Lakey, 2012). When studying conflict, it is important to address the difference between conflict and aggression (Shantz & Hobart, 1989); for instance, aggression is one type of conflict but not all conflicts include acts of aggression. Some levels of conflict and disagreements in families is normative, necessary, and potentially beneficial to relationships (Katz et al., 1992). In fact, some degree of conflict may be necessary for relationships to develop and be maintained (Canary & Lakey, 2012).

Reasons for conflicts in relationships. Conflict sometimes occurs when expectations for relational togetherness and individual autonomy collide, as a result of this collision conflict is commonly experienced between family members (Caughlin et al., 2011; Katz et al., 1992). Conflicts also occur when resources are scarce (White et al., 2019), which results in competition over those limited resources. Competition for resources is a common phenomenon in all families (White et al., 2019), but in stepfamilies, resources such as money, parental attention and time, and physical space may be more limited than these resources in first marriage families (Golish, 2003; Mikkelsen et al., 2011). Furthermore, there is evidence that the distribution of resources by adults to children in stepfamilies may differ depending on the children's genetic and legal connections to the adults (Mikkelsen et al., 2011). For example, stepparents have reported feeling less obligated to provide resources to their stepchildren than to their biological children (Aquilino, 2005; Sweeney, 2010). For these reasons (i.e., decreased support, additional demands on resources), conflicts between stepfamily members are often more frequent than among members of first marriage families (Mikkelsen et al., 2011; Pryor, 2014).

Coleman and colleagues (2001), in a qualitative study exploring conflict experienced by 58 stepfamily members, reported that the most common cause for disagreements were stepfamily system rules and expectations. Stepfamilies, particularly structurally complex systems that are

combining members of at least two prior family systems, are challenged to create new system rules, roles, and rituals while also forming new relationships and maintaining existing bonds with biological or adoptive kin (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Merging members of different family systems and creating stepfamily rules and roles creates conflict among individuals as they co-facilitate the development of new norms and identities for the stepfamily structure (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Visher & Visher, 2013). Interpersonal conflicts and disagreements are more likely when families lack cohesion and when they disagree about rules, rituals, and expectations for others (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2013).

Stepfamily scholars have recognized the importance of studying conflicts within stepfamily systems (Coleman et al., 2001). In addition to studies about step-household conflicts (e.g., Coleman et al., 2001; Afifi, 2003), there have been several studies about stepparent-stepchild conflicts (e.g., Schlomer et al., 2010), coparental conflicts after remarriage or repartnering (e.g., Robitallie et al., 2011; Halford et al., 2007; King & DeLongis, 2013), and a few on conflict across the households (e.g., Hanson et al., 1996). To date, few studies have examined any aspect of stepsibling conflicts (see Campo et al., 2012 for an exception). The relative lack of research on stepsibling conflicts is a critical gap in the stepfamily literature.

Benefits from relational conflicts. Conflict theorists propose that individuals learn valuable skills from engaging in conflicts (Canary & Lakey, 2012). Conflict among siblings may be some of the clearest examples of the acquisition and development of both intrapersonal and interpersonal skills (McHale et al., 2012; Hartup & Laursen, 1993; Sherman et al., 2006; Ross & Milgram, 1982). For example, conflicts among siblings can serve an important role in the mutual development of their ability to perspective-take, empathize, negotiate, and problem-solve (McHale et al., 2012). Conflict between siblings is also thought to be an important part of the

process of developing a differentiated identity - siblings promote their sense of self (Bedford, Volling, & Avioli, 2000; Shantz & Hobart, 1989).

Adolescent siblings often experience conflicts with greater frequency and intensity when there are perceived violations of boundaries regarding personal space or friendships (Campione-Barr & Smetana, 2010; McGuire et al., 2000). Sibling conflict can be beneficial for individual and relational development, however, greater frequency and intensity at which conflict occurs is associated with less positive sibling relationships (Campione-Barr & Smetana, 2010). These findings were expanded upon by Lindell, Campione-Barr, and Greer (2014), who examined the impact conflict had on sibling relationships during the transition to young adulthood. Findings indicated that siblings who reported more conflict during adolescence had more egalitarian relationships during this transition.

Although it would be inaccurate to generalize findings from sibling conflict research to stepsiblings, the research on conflict within sibling subsystems can stimulate and sensitize research on stepsiblings. Stepsibling relationships resemble biological or adoptive siblings in some ways (e.g., sharing a household), but they also share similarities to peer relationships (e.g., no biological or legal relation). Stepsibling relationships are characterized by qualities congruent with what have been called open-field and closed-field relationships (Collins & Laursen, 1992). Like siblings, stepsiblings subsystems are closed-field relationships in that they are involuntary ties, but because they lack shared genetics or legal connections, they also resemble open-field relationships with peers, which are more voluntary in nature (Collins & Laursen, 1992). It is unclear if stepsiblings reap the benefits of closed-field relationships, which are better able to withstand more conflict, or resemble more open-field relationships when they experience

conflict. These differences between siblings and stepsiblings may affect how stepsiblings think about and engage in conflict with each other.

Researchers must recognize and investigate the unique characteristics of stepsibling relationships using within-group designs or qualitative research methods (Sanner et al., 2018). Conflict between one dyad in a family is likely to impact more than just the individuals directly involved (Katz et al., 1992). This is yet another reason a study is needed about stepsibling conflicts - these interactions can impact not only the stepsiblings, they can affect the parent-stepparent couple, the stepsibling-stepparent relationship, and may potentially spillover to the nonresidential parent's household. The current study could also provide insight useful for practitioners working with stepfamilies; understanding the dynamics of stepsibling conflicts could help practitioners learn models for how stepsiblings engage in, manage, and resolve conflicts, and could provide examples of effective and ineffective management strategies.

What is Meant by Conflict Management?

Strategies for Managing Conflict. Conflict management is the process by which the conflict is approached by the individuals experiencing the event (Canary et al., 2013), successful management does not guarantee resolution (Canary & Lakey, 2012). Conflict management can be both an interpersonal (e.g., negotiation, mediation) and intrapersonal (e.g., perspective taking, accommodation; Canary et. al, 2013) processes, and the conflict event may be categorized as constructive or destructive. These categorizations are associated with management strategies used (Canary & Lakey, 2012). Multiple strategies can be used in the same conflict experience (Canary & Lakey, 2012).

Constructive conflict and effective management strategies. Constructive conflicts are characterized by the use of problem-focused approaches (Montemayor & Hanson, 1985; Vandell

& Bailey, 1992). For example, when people negotiate with one another, they disclose their original goals to work together in attempts to reach those goals (White et al., 2019). In order to achieve their opposing goals, the parties must communicate with one another. If the parties experiencing conflict are having difficulty identifying the source of the conflict or how to assist one another to attain their differing goals they may require a third party to assist (e.g., mediation; Canary et al., 2013). These management processes involve both parties, whereas attribution is a way to manage conflict on an intrapersonal level (Canary et al., 2013).

Attributional control is the avoidance of applying attributions that blame the opposing party for the conflict (Canary et al., 2013). The goal instead is to assign the occurrence of conflict to a force outside of the individuals' control or that it was unintentional (Zillmann, 1993). For example, when feeling annoyed with another person's behavior one can attribute the reason for the behavior being the direct result of the person's age instead of an attribution that the individual was purposefully trying to be annoying ("She is just being a typical five-year-old; she is not being loud on purpose").

The effectiveness of conflict management strategies may be determined by the individual's goals. Avoidance has been characterized as a strategy that is used in relationships when someone is not invested in the relationship's stability or quality (Canary & Lakey, 2012). However, if avoidance is used because an individual does not wish to make the interpersonal conflict more intense, then it may be considered an effective strategy (Canary & Lakey, 2012; Cai & Fink, 2002; Rhoades & Carnevale, 1999).

Destructive conflict and ineffective management strategies. Poor conflict management in interpersonal relationships is associated with negative physical and psychological outcomes (Ting-Toomey, 2013). These destructive strategies can be categorized as conflicts with high

intensity and negative affect (Recchia & Howe, 2008; Vandell & Bailey 1992). When individuals experience conflict with high levels of negative affect, they are more likely to use ineffective strategies (e.g., avoid, withdraw; Gottman, 1994).

Although avoidance can be goal-oriented, it is often categorized as a passive strategy (Wang, Fink, & Cai, 2012). Families who used avoidance (e.g., denying the presence of a problem) were less stable compared to those who use problem-focused strategies (Saint Jacques, Robitaille, et al., 2011). When avoidance is frequently used to manage conflict, it is problematic to the relationship (Canary & Lakey, 2012), and thus may be considered a destructive conflict management strategy.

Withdrawing is like avoiding in that conflict is not addressed, but when an individual withdraws from the conflict, he or she does so both physically and emotionally (Canary & Lakey, 2012). Withdrawing is an ineffective strategy because there is no communication, goals are not attained, and it may be interpreted as a lack of emotional investment in the relationship (Loving, Le, & Crockett, 2009).

The Current Study

Frequent and intense conflict in interpersonal relationships is associated with negative physical and psychological outcomes (Canary & Lakey, 2012; Oetzel, 2013). Although some levels of conflict are expected and considered “normal,” conflict can have adverse effects. To promote positive relationship qualities, personal growth, and emotional well-being, it may be beneficial to examine the communication and management strategies in the relationships of understudied populations (e.g., stepsiblings). The purpose of this grounded theory study was to explore how stepsiblings engage in, manage, and resolve conflicts. Specifically, I sought to describe the processes that facilitate or impede conflict management among stepsiblings.

Research questions included: What do stepsiblings have conflicts about? Under what conditions do stepsiblings conflict/disagree? When do they have conflicts? Why do they have conflicts? What are the contexts within which stepsiblings have conflicts? What roles, if any, do biological parents and stepparents play in stepsibling conflicts?

I approached this grounded theory study from a perspective of resiliency (i.e., identifying and describing processes that promote growth) to study of how stepsiblings manage conflicts. This perspective was guided in part by concepts derived from symbolic interaction (SI) theory, a theory that examines the meanings behind intrapersonal processes and interpersonal behaviors (White et al., 2019). SI concepts, such as identities and interactions, are focused on how individuals translate verbal and nonverbal interactions, such as conflicts with stepsiblings, into meanings about self-identity and family (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Because family conflicts can impact more individuals than those directly interacting, the study was also informed by concepts from family systems theory, particularly the concepts of subsystems, boundaries, and direct and indirect effects.

CHAPTER 2: METHOD

Sample

The sample contained 21 females and 4 males who identified as stepsiblings. Their ages ranged from 19 to 27 years old ($M = 21.24$). Eighteen were Caucasian, one identified as biracial (Asian and Caucasian), one was African American, and five reported neither race nor ethnicity.

The average age at the time of parental relationship dissolution (e.g., separation or divorce) was 8.65 years. Two participants whose mothers died were not included in this average, although their ages were included in average age of fathers' repartnering ($\bar{x} = 13.58$ years). The average age of participants when mothers repartnered was 15.05 years. The most common custody arrangement was joint custody ($N = 16$), followed by mothers having primary custody ($N = 5$), and fathers having primary custody ($N = 3$, including the two participants whose mothers were deceased).

Participants reported on 71 stepsibling relationships. Of these, nine gained stepsiblings through the remarriage or repartnering of their mother, eleven gained through the remarriage or repartnering of their father, and five through the remarriage or repartnering of both parents. Two participants described relationships with current and former stepsiblings. Of these two, one had two ex-stepsiblings on her father's side, and one had three ex-stepsiblings on his father's side. The average age gap between participants and the stepsibling closest to them in age was 3.5 years (max = 10 and min = 0). The average age gap between participants and the stepsibling furthest in age was 7.3 years (max = 13 and min = 2).

Eighteen participants had full siblings as well as stepsiblings. Four had paternal half-siblings, and one had half-siblings through both parents (See Table 1). Seven participants had

older half-siblings from parents' prior relationships ($N = 4$ had older maternal half-siblings and $N = 3$ had older paternal half-siblings).

Recruitment

Participants were drawn from an ongoing research project at a mid-western university. They were recruited using mass email ads, flyers (e.g., hardcopies and e-copy displayed on a department monitor; see Appendix A), and announcements made in selected courses. To be eligible for the study individuals had to be between 18 and 26 years old and self-identify as a stepsibling. The sample excluded individuals who did not have at least one stepsibling. The sample included stepsiblings formed by either a parent's remarriage or cohabiting union. We sought young adults because we wanted respondents who could cognitively reflect on their experiences as stepsiblings. No exclusion criteria were set for age when the parent remarried or repartnered, time spent as stepsiblings, shared residency, or relationship closeness. Participants were given a \$10 gift as an honorarium.

Potential study participants sent an email to the e-mail address listed on the announcement, indicating their interest in the study. They were contacted by a research team member and a brief screening was done to determine if they met inclusion criteria. If they did, an appointment was made for an interview to be conducted on campus. If they did not meet inclusion criteria, they were thanked for volunteering and there was no further contact with them.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in a private research space on campus by me or another member of the research team. Participants were asked to review and sign the IRB consent form (Appendix B). They were told that they could end the interview at any time without penalty. The duration of interviews varied between 60 and 90 minutes. A second interview was scheduled for

some participants either because they were deemed ‘data rich,’ meaning they provided information that was reflective, extensive, and novel, or when they were unable to complete the interview in the scheduled time but wanted to provide more information. If a second interview was conducted, consent was obtained a second time and the participant received an additional gift-card. The interviews were recorded, and the recordings were sent to a third party for transcription. Consent forms, receipts, and recordings were stored in a secured drawer.

The interviews began with constructing genograms that contained ages and genders of family members, dates of marriages, divorces, cohabitations, deaths, and other demographic information. The genograms were followed by open-ended questions (see Appendix C) that were designed to help participants reflect on their experiences with stepsiblings, specifically conflicts. For example, they were asked to describe instances in which they felt “annoyed” by their stepsiblings. They were asked to expand on any “yes” or “no” responses by describing their motivations behind conflict management strategies used.

Individuals were asked to describe their definition of conflict. Conflict theory and symbolic interactionism were used to provide sensitizing concepts to examine stepsiblings’ experiences. A central component of conflict theory is competition that occurs over resources (White et al., 2019). For this study, resources were considered to be the disbursement of money and capital goods, time spent with parents and other members of the family of origin, an individual’s territory or personal property (i.e. bedroom, bathroom, or clothing), and power (i.e., influence in the household) within the stepfamily.

In addition to conflict theory, symbolic interaction theory concepts were used to examine the ways in which stepsiblings attributed meanings to interactions with one another. Following the conclusion of the conducting interview, reading the transcript, or listening to the recording,

the team members drafted memos, which were used to capture the interviewer's initial thoughts regarding the interview (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Data Analysis

Transcripts were coded using the three-stage (i.e., open, axial, and selective) method established by Corbin and Strauss' (2015) for GTM analyses. Analysis began with open coding. Transcripts were read line-by-line and verbatim codes (i.e., *in vivo* codes; Corbin & Strauss, 2015) are identified. Each separate idea was coded; a single sentence had the potential to contain more than one coded idea. A strategy of constant comparison, in which similarities and differences between concepts are compared, was used to transform the codes into broader concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). For example, the phrases "I was always very vocal with my mom about how I felt about her [stepsister]" and "I just tell her [mom] because it helps me work through the situation" were grouped into the category "venting to a third party." Some concepts coded at this stage may be relevant to the later stages of coding and others may not. The importance of a concept was unknown until a concept was theoretically saturated (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; LaRossa, 2005).

Each team member independently created open codes after several transcripts were available. The team compared open codes and created a master codebook. During these discussions, I provided my reasoning and definitions for the identified concepts. If the team created different codes or differed in how we defined the concepts for verbatim codes, we discussed these differences until consensus was reached. The consensus codebook was used to code subsequent transcripts.

Axial Coding was used to identify the themes that bridged the broader concepts together, such as conditions necessary for the broader codes to occur and the consequences of specific

phenomenon. Following the development of themes, *selective coding* was used to create a storyline from the data for the experience and management of stepsibling conflict (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Data coding and analyses continued as more stepsiblings were added to the sample (See Figure 1.1). Due to a lack of literature regarding the stepsibling experience, GTM's flexibility allowed me to expand, adjust, or discard themes as the data came in, thus providing greater opportunity for the identification and theoretical saturation of key concepts.

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

Stepsibling Conflict

Three conditions necessary for conflict to occur were: (1) opportunity (i.e., shared time, shared space, ability to interact), (2) intimacy (i.e., perceived closeness between stepsiblings, close friendship or familiarity), and (3) similarity (i.e., age, gender, or role in family). Sources of conflict included behaviors of a stepsibling, violations of territory (e.g., bedrooms), differential treatment by step/parents, and disputes over resources. When disagreements and disputes did occur, conflict management involved both intrapersonal and interpersonal strategies.

Conditions for Conflict

The 25 stepchildren in the sample had 71 stepsiblings, but they did not experience conflicts with all of them. For stepsiblings to engage in conflict three conditions needed to be in place: (1) opportunity, (2) intimacy, and (3) similarity. All three conditions needed to be present for conflicts to occur between stepsiblings and each had the potential to influence one or both of the other conditions. For example, more opportunities to interact with stepsiblings could promote intimacy between them.

Opportunity. It was possible for stepsibling relationships to span two or more households, reducing the chances for their lives to intersect. If stepsiblings did not have opportunities to interact, defined as time spent together (e.g., in the same household), they experienced little or no conflicts. For example, one stepchild stated:

There just isn't that much opportunity to necessarily develop any sort of conflict . . . I just am not around them enough to foster situations in which there would be actual real conflict, so I think that's the main reason why there isn't anything.

Another stepsister also attributed her lack of time together in the shared household as a reason for not experiencing conflicts, “We didn’t really have anything to fight about. . . . maybe it was ‘cause we weren’t around each other that much.”

Another woman, who reported high levels of conflict with her stepsister, explained her stepsister’s constant presence in the household as being a reason for their conflict. She explained:

[My stepsister] doesn’t have any friends so she’s there [at the house] a lot, which is hard because she doesn’t go out. . . . She’s just always around the house, which is a lot of our issues with her as well.

Intimacy. Not only did stepsiblings require time to interact with one another for conflicts to occur, they also needed to feel emotionally close or have personal knowledge of their stepsiblings. Intimacy was the perceived level of emotional closeness between stepsiblings. As one stated:

. . . the reason why I’m so uncomfortable with [addressing tensions] is ‘cause I haven’t known her for very long so it’s kind of like, “what right do I have?” I feel like I don’t know her well enough to say anything negative yet ‘cause I don’t even say a ton of positive stuff. We’re still very on the surface.

Another stated:

I would kind of be like, “I don’t really agree with what they just said,” but I would just sit back and be quiet when I disagreed with them [stepsibling] ‘cause I didn’t feel like I was close enough with them to say that. There wasn’t that bond there.

When stepsibling relationship were not perceived to be emotionally close, stepsiblings did not feel comfortable engaging in conflict. As one woman explained, “It would be like yelling at one of your classmates. . . you do not have a sense of familiarity where you can voice exactly

what you want to say.” Stepsiblings also needed to feel secure in their relationships before engaging in conflicts. A woman described her closeness with her stepbrother, who had been a friend years before their parents remarried, as a possible reason he sometimes treated her harshly:

I think he felt more comfortable [being rude] and (2) . . . more of a grasp on the situation.

If you’re that rude to a friend they just won’t be your friend anymore, whereas I [being his stepsister] will have to see him perpetually so it’s different, I’ll always be around now.

Intimacy also involved knowing the stepsiblings as a condition to engaging in conflicts with them. Stepsiblings reported a lack of knowledge about their stepsibling as a reason to not engage in conflict. As one stated, “I don’t want to say she’s a stranger but she’s still not the vibe necessarily of close family or my best friend, ‘cause I still just don’t know her that well.”

A female stepsibling described how her ability to address tensions and annoyances with her stepbrother changed overtime. She described this as a result of their relationship having deepened. She explained:

I would say we got closer. I couldn’t say that to someone who I just met so just, like me and [my stepbrother] used to go on drives . . . just the two of us, and talk, hang out, and get to know each other. After we did that a few times we got closer to where I could express [displeasure in stepbrother’s behavior] that instead of just saying it out of nowhere, meaning nothing ‘cause I’m just the stepsister.

Another female was asked what it would take for her to approach her stepbrother to address conflict. Her response illustrates the bidirectional influence between intimacy and opportunity and the role each play in conflict:

Time and time spent more together. We're not super-duper close, we don't share our secrets with each other. We talk about our day but there's not that, 'if I tell you something, we're going to fix it'... So, I think more time spent together and him proving to me in some way that he does care for me in that stepbrother way.

Similarity. Similarity between stepsiblings included being of the same gender, at similar ages/stages of development, interests, and having comparable personal identities (e.g., athlete, academic, responsible, quiet). Stepsiblings were likely to experience conflicts when they had more in common. One participant described the reasons her relationship with her stepsister did not contain conflict, as a result of having different identities, "We just don't have the same hobbies or the same likes or interests - you can't really fight about something if you don't like it in the first place." Another stepsister described the difference between the amount of conflict between stepsiblings in one household versus the other. She attributed the presence of confrontation with their stepsiblings in their father's household to being closer in age than stepsiblings in her mother's household with whom she reported little or no conflict. "I would say that [conflict is] definitely more prevalent on the other side [father's household] since [stepsister 1] and [stepsister 2] are so close to us in age that there is sometimes that conflict."

For some stepsiblings, similarity in ages and interests mattered more than similarity in gender:

[My stepsister] would go in the kitchen and cook or something just to get away. Then [stepbrother] just kind of hung out with [half-brother] and me in the back. Usually like two of us were on the computer and one was playing video games or vice versa. I guess we had more in common with our stepbrother so we kind of like hung out with him more.

[My stepsister] was just so young and very like girly and, I had more in common with [half- and stepbrother], now that I say I feel kind of bad for excluding her.

Sources of Conflict

Stepsiblings were asked to provide examples of the sources of conflict between themselves and their stepsiblings. To explore encounters that resulted in conflict, they were asked to describe events, experiences, or topics that may have resulted in “issues,” “annoyances,” “conflicts,” or “tensions” with their stepsiblings. These various labels were used to capture a wide range of experiences that may have created conflicts between stepsiblings that may not have resulted in direct confrontations or aggressive behaviors, such as shouting or physically fighting. Common sources of conflict included *Stepsibling Behaviors*, *Territory*, *Differential Treatment by Step/parents*, and *Resources*.

Stepsibling Behaviors. Stepsibling behaviors were defined as actions that participants identified as unwanted or annoying. These irritating and unwanted actions did not have to be directed only at the respondent but could also include behaviors directed towards the residential parent or another person. For example, one woman described her stepbrother, “yelling at my dad and saying those [negative] things to my dad. That bothered me, just because I was like, ‘my dad’s not that person, how could you say that when you don’t know him?’” Another young woman was asked to expand on why her stepsiblings showing “a lack of gratitude” was a source of conflict with them. She said:

It kind of just creates conflict whenever they don’t . . . say ‘thank you’ to my mom. That would be conflict to me [because] that’s my mom, I’m thankful for her and they’re not. So that’s what I’m talking about with [lack of] gratitude.

Behavior outside of the home also caused conflicts; for example, one woman described trying to disassociate from her stepsister because she disapproved of her stepsister's flirtatious behaviors with men. Another stepsister described her younger stepbrother's misbehavior in church as a reoccurring source of tension that bothered her. In some cases, stepsiblings could not identify a single instance of stepsibling behavior that created conflict, instead focusing on the stepsiblings' general deportment. For instance, one woman said about a younger stepbrother, "I mean, it's more just like I think he's annoying, and I think he's immature. That's the only conflict that we really have."

Sometimes stepsibling's personality traits or characteristics were perceived to be stable attributes of the stepsibling that led to conflicts. Chronically annoying behaviors were perceived to be ongoing aspects of who the stepsiblings were as people. One woman stated:

[Stepsister] was like "You do this, like you're going to play by my rules," and [stepmom] was just like "Ha, ha, she's (stepsister) going be a cruise director when she's older, great." My dad and I were like, "your daughter's a brat." I really tried to get [my stepsister] to play nice, 'don't be like that, no one's going to like you,' and I was . . . [saying to her], ". . . the mean middle school girls, they don't make it in high school, they have no friends when they get into high school." I kept trying to tell her that and then she just came to resent me, and it hardened the relationship even more.

Territory. After parents remarried or repartnered, they usually joined households with the new partner by moving into one of the partners' homes or they relocated to a new household for the new stepfamily. This combining of households, whether as cohabiting couples or remarried spouses, meant that children were faced with sharing a residence with stepsiblings either full time or part-time. They shared the home in which they were living pre-remarriage,

they moved into the stepsiblings' household, or all the children moved into a new household.

With rare exceptions, the stepfamily household configuration presented stepsiblings with issues of establishing and maintaining boundaries for territory, or physical space.

Sharing their home with stepsiblings. Having a stepparent and one or more stepsiblings move into the household of the stepchild and parent sometimes led to conflicts over the use of space. Parents' and stepparents' attempts at mitigating territorial issues sometimes did not work as intended. For example, one stepdaughter was angry about her parent's and stepparent's efforts to find a space for her stepsister, which led to conflicts about hanging out in the basement with friends:

...[My stepsister] got the nicer room downstairs, they [parent and stepparent] built a room for her down there with a huge closet. She got her own bathroom. They painted her walls really nice. She had a really nice room down in the basement... It was also weird because like her friends would come over and I was like, this is my house and my friends don't even come over that often, so she would have her friends over while I was there, which was weird cause we were all the same age but we didn't really like hang out. She would say, "You can come hang out with us in the hot tub," but it was with her friends and they would take over the basement and it was weird.

Another young woman had moved into a bedroom in the basement when her stepmother and stepbrothers moved into the household. The bedroom was previously her older full brother's room (he was out of the house), and she personalized the space. Her younger stepbrothers would frequently play in her room or in the space just outside of it, and so she attempted to address the situation and offered the following explanation as to why it was a source of conflict.

Why do they have to play full force battle royale in the middle of the basement, like can't we compromise on this? So that was a big issue. I would go to my dad and then dad and [stepmom] would fight, and it was a territory thing. It was like who had the right to the basement.

Another female described a source of conflict that stemmed from sharing a household with a stepsister who stole her clothing when the participant was not home:

Her taking my clothes out of my closet without asking me. ... just about every time she came over and it was always like a hassle to get the clothes back because she would go to her dad's house or a friend's house... It was really like annoying. I kind of thought about it and realized it is a sister thing. I do this to my little sister, and she does it to me. But I was just like "Stop going in my room." So, I started locking the door because it is what [my stepmom] told me to [do]. She was like, "Just lock your door."

Moving into the stepsiblings' household. Stepsiblings described violations of their established physical space as a source of conflict. One stepbrother who went back and forth between his parents' households, described a central source of tension with his younger stepsisters when they entered his bedroom [built for him by his father], while he was at his mother's household:

We finished the basement when we moved into their house and I had my own bathroom and bedroom down there, and on weeks when I was gone not only would the living space outside of my room be trashed from sleepovers and stuff, but sometimes my room would be, too. I feel like I kind of had to draw the line sometimes with where I wanted them to be.

One woman described being the one who violated her stepsisters' territory as a result of parents redistributing her stepsister's space:

I was in that little computer room and then [stepsisters] went to college, we had two other rooms empty so Mom let me move to one of the bigger rooms, and then they came back for college and didn't have their rooms and then they let everyone know that they wanted their rooms back so I got moved back to the computer room. I had the [bigger] room for a day.

Moving into new stepfamily households. When they could afford to do so, newly co-residing stepfamilies would move into a dwelling large enough to hold all of the residential and visiting nonresidential children from prior unions. Territorial issues came into play even in these situations. One participant was happy to have her own room when she periodically lived with her father and stepmother after they married, but when the stepfamily expanded with the birth of first one and then a second half-sibling, the subsequent household relocations forced her to share a bedroom with a stepsister when she visited and then in a third move, she was relegated to the "guest room." This felt like a demotion in family status to her and contributed to conflicts with stepsiblings who lived in the household full-time and who had therefore claimed space in the household that was clearly theirs.

Differential Treatment. Differential treatment was when stepsiblings engaged in similar behaviors that resulted in different rewards or punishments by the parent and stepparent.

Differential treatment also involved stepsiblings being held to different standards or expectations by the adults in the stepfamily household. For example:

I think my dad was harder on me when [stepsister] was there and seemed a little more happy-go-lucky [with her] when she was there. He would always be nice to her and not as nice to me...

Differential treatment as a source of conflict involved parents' and stepparents' decisions or behaviors that created contention or jealousy between stepsiblings. For example:

I liked cleaning the bathroom, I didn't have an issue with it, and I got an allowance for it...I had to have my chores done on the weekends before I could go see my mom, and in my mind I thought that was unfair because there were plenty of weekends that [my stepsiblings] would go out with their friends before they would do their chores and it's here I am right after school trying to hustle so I could get it done just so I can get in the car and go.

Another stepsibling explained that despite their age difference, hers' and her stepsisters' academic accomplishments were compared:

When my grades weren't as good as hers my dad would downgrade my grades. But she's like a younger grade than me so I felt like that wasn't fair. I don't get in trouble for it or wouldn't get like praise for my grades cause I'm in a higher grade and my work was harder. But she's in a young grade and she had, like maybe one more A than me and like she would get praise for it.

Resources. Both tangible goods (e.g., money, gifts, financial support) and affective resources (e.g., parental attention and affection) were sources of conflict for some stepsiblings when resources were limited.

Tangible goods. Tangible goods were a source of conflict when stepsiblings perceived to have been given more by a parent or stepparent than they should have been given. Conflicts

about tangible goods originated in the parent-child, stepparent-child, or extended stepfamily relationships. The most apparent examples were when stepsiblings were allowed to go on family vacations, but the respondent was excluded or when stepsiblings received more or more expensive gifts for birthdays and holidays.

I just felt she got everything. It was all the time. When I go over to their house for like Christmas, I feel like their family only buys them [stepsiblings] certain things. They only buy them what they like, but they'll just give me anything. Or, for my birthday I did not get anything, but even when I was little, I didn't get anything but [my stepsister] got everything.

Another stepsister described her reaction if her stepfamily gave her different amounts of money for a holiday, "I would feel very robbed if I had known, like if I were in her shoes and I knew that my grandma gave me more money than her."

Affective resources. Affection and attention from family members, particularly biological parents, constituted most of the affective resources that were the sources of conflict and competition between stepsiblings. For example, "I was really upset because I felt like our (father-child) relationship started lacking very quickly after they got together and got married because he was splitting his attention between not just two girls but four girls." In the case of this participant, the presence of a stepsibling and stepparent diluted the amount of parental attention she had previously received from her father. Much like another young woman described experiencing with her stepsister and mother:

It's her wanting to be the center of attention. She'll fight for attention from my mom. It's stealing attention from me because she's such a troublesome child and they always have

to discipline her so I didn't get a lot of attention because I felt like they were always so preoccupied with her and raising her that I didn't get attention, so I wanted attention.

Another stepchild described parental time and attention as the primary source for stepsibling conflicts in the household, "the main tension that would have happened in the household would have been stemming from each of us wanting to have alone time with our parents and not being able to do that." One woman was aware of the emotional boundaries her younger stepsister had established, "[my stepsister] did not want anyone impeding on her life. [She] was very territorial of her mom . . ."

Conflict Management Strategies

Stepsiblings used more than one management strategy if a source of conflict was deemed important or if the relationship developed to a point that stepsiblings felt they could engage in more direct strategies. Strategies used to manage conflict among stepsiblings fell broadly into one of two categories: *intrapersonal processes* and *interpersonal processes*. Intrapersonal conflict management strategies were defined as techniques that did not involve another person. Instead, individuals modified their thoughts or feelings as ways of managing conflicts. Interpersonal conflict management occurred when the stepsibling verbally engaged with another person.

Intrapersonal strategies. Stepsiblings who engaged in intrapersonal processes did so in three main ways: avoiding, cognitive reframing, and self-soothing. Stepchildren often tried to avoid stepsiblings or situations that had potential to create conflicts, but when conflicts did occur, they cognitively reframed the stepsibling's behaviors that created an issue or they engaged in emotional regulation strategies such as self-soothing.

Avoiding. A male stepsibling who was experiencing conflicts with his stepsisters removed himself from the situation by, “A lot of hiding in my room, you know... A lot of avoiding being around them.” A woman reported a similar experience:

I don't want to be present for this. So I usually just kind of like would distance myself from her. So that probably was, I never thought about it like that, I think it was like how everyone else acted and then me being like, ‘I don't want to be around that and that's annoying to me,’ so then I would just leave.

Avoiding was often employed because stepchildren did not feel close enough to their stepsiblings to address conflicts directly and because they wanted to avoid confronting the stepsiblings: “[Stepsister] and I still just aren't that close so I don't want confrontation and I would never just be like, ‘Can you talk about something else?’” Another stepsibling avoided conflicts because of the potential impact it could have on the family-unit, “if there is conflict you don't express it unless it's a big deal... Because things will get out of control and kind of, it'll just be a mess.” One stepsister reported experiencing so much conflict with her stepsiblings, disagreements that spilled over to other family relationships, that she moved out of the stepfamily household to avoid further conflicts.

Reframing. Stepsiblings used cognitive reframing to change the meanings they were attributing to the annoyances, interactions, or behaviors that were sources of conflict. For example, a stepbrother with younger stepsiblings explained, “Every once in a while, they [stepsiblings] will bother me, but it's never enough to address. They [stepsiblings] just go through little phases where they'll do things just like all kids do.” This stepbrother was able to reframe the behaviors that annoyed him as natural, developmental occurrences that were due to the stepsiblings' ages. He decided that they were not trying to irritate him on purpose, and that

their aggravating behaviors would change over time as they matured. A woman described what she believed to be the reason for her father treating her stepsister with more leniency.

We literally just did the same thing, why are we getting treated different? I think it was because he [father] knew I was his and she [stepsister] wasn't, and that he didn't have as much like parenting [control] over her as he did me.

Although one woman was upset with her stepbrother's treatment of her father, she did not approach either him or her father because she reframed this as their conflict, and not hers:

I wouldn't because it wasn't between me, it wasn't my place to say that. It was between my dad and him, and they needed to work things out. Obviously, I wanted to be like "Well, hold up, my dad's a great person," but it wasn't my place to get in the middle of that..."

Self-soothing. Stepsiblings privately engaged in behaviors that helped them manage their emotions stemming from conflict. One young man described that when he was experiencing conflict with his younger stepsiblings he would "...go for runs around the neighborhood." A woman was asked what she would do when she was upset with how things were going in her stepfamily.

I journaled. I love journaling. I would write about like whatever upsets me, like talk about my mom or I'd write about how it always seemed like [stepbrother] was able to have more friends over than I did and like we weren't ever allowed to have friends over like at the same time because he was a boy and I was a girl. That pissed me off, so I'd write about that.

Interpersonal Strategies. Interpersonal conflict management strategies were also commonly employed. They included: venting to a third party, approaching stepsiblings directly, asking a third party to mediate, and having a parent or stepparent intervene.

Venting. Participants vented (i.e., talked, described, explained) about the conflict to biological siblings or parents. The aim of this strategy was not necessarily to resolve the conflict but to express their thoughts and emotions to a trusted person. Sometimes, venting to another person was an indirect way to problem solve. For example, a participant explained her reasoning for venting: “I do not tell my mom in hopes that she will do something or [in] hopes that she’ll tell [stepdad]. I just tell her because I think it helps me work through the situation.” Stepsiblings did not only vent to parents, but to other family members. For example, when experiencing conflict with stepsisters, a woman expressed concerns to her sisters: “I’d tell [my sisters] whatever [my stepsiblings] did that annoyed me and then [my sisters] would probably have some smart aleck remark to say back, and then like we’d laugh about it and then just go on.”

Approaching stepsiblings directly. Confronting the stepsibling directly to address the issue was perhaps the least common strategy used by stepsiblings when managing conflict. One stepsister described the change in her conflict management style over time:

When we first met and a little while after that I would just deal with it, but now I’ll . . . say, “Stop, you are annoying.” It’s not anything that would bother her, make her feel bad about herself or anything like that. I’ll say, “I’m trying to watch a movie, get out of the way.”

When a woman was asked to describe her conflict style, she described being “lenient” but still possessing a willingness to approach her stepsibling: “I would say I’m very, very lenient. I try to be as nice as possible but there are times where I have told [my stepbrother] specifically,

‘stop being this way.’ I’ve stood up for myself.” Another stepsibling reported addressing her stepbrother directly, “I told him to stop being an A-hole and he was, he looked at me and he was kind of shocked and like I just looked straightforward. That’s one of the two times where I’ve told him to stop being disrespectful.” Although addressing conflict directly comes with risks, one participant described the verbal disputes with her stepsibling as normal and brief:

It was just kind of normal bickering back and forth. We never actually hated each other or anything, though.... I mean, just arguing over something small like “Oh, you did this,” “Oh, no, you did that,”, nothing major, something you’d get mad at about for maybe an hour.

Asking a third party to mediate. Asking a third party to mediate occurred when one of the stepsiblings reached out to another family member to address the conflict. A stepsister described stepsiblings engaging in this strategy by stating, “If they (stepsiblings) have an issue they’ll tell [my stepdad] and then he has to deal with it.” This strategy was different from venting, because the expectation was that the adult would help resolve the conflict. “If there’s ever conflict I kind of, if it was with the kids’ [stepsiblings’] attitude I would tell my mom and she would tell [my stepdad].” One woman reported going through her stepbrother to manage potential conflicts with her stepsister:

My stepsister] was just older than me so she kind of scared me. I wouldn’t really ever, I might like mention it to [my stepbrother]. I think maybe she was playing music really loud one night and I was doing homework or something and I was like “[stepbrother], tell her to turn it down.”

This strategy to manage conflicts was not always dependable, because the third party may or may not get involved in resolving the problem. As a daughter explained her father’s reaction

to getting involved, “He hated being the middleman. I would come to him for a lot of things, because I felt like I had no space.” Sometimes her father would simply ignore her requests to intervene, leaving it up to her and the stepsiblings.

Being confronted by parents. Some stepsiblings reported parental interventions as a way in which conflicts between stepsiblings were managed. This strategy was different than asking parents to mediate because parents intervened without a request of them to do so. Being confronted by parents occurred more often when conflicts were verbal and in the presence of parents. Parents and stepparents had to observe or be aware of the conflicts between stepsiblings in order to intervene. For example, when a stepbrother experienced conflicts with his younger stepsiblings, “Usually my dad is the one that solves it. The typical fatherly like ‘Go to your room,’ you know, that kind of thing. ‘If you’re going to fight go to your separate rooms.’” A stepsister reported her conflicts with stepsiblings over chores as, “We all argue and then one of the parents would tell us to shut up and, ‘One of you do it,’ or something.” Rarely, stepsibling conflicts were handled by family meetings led by the parent and stepparent: “. . . if someone is having a problem, it gets brought up at family dinner and you talk about it.”

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This grounded theory study provides greater insight into stepsibling relationships, specifically the context and process of conflict among stepsiblings. We identified conditions necessary for conflict to be experienced, common sources of conflict, and strategies used to manage conflict in stepsibling relationships. Some of the results are congruent with findings from sibling conflict literature (i.e., sources and conditions for conflict), but stepsibling relationships are formed and maintained in an environment shrouded in ambiguity that makes the conflict process more uncertain for stepsiblings than for siblings. For this study, conflict was defined as the interference of opposing values and goals between interdependent parties (Putnam & Poole, 1987).

Conditions for Stepsibling Conflict

The 25 stepchildren in the sample had 71 stepsiblings, but they did not experience conflicts with all of them. Some stepsibling relationships had little or no conflict, and some had frequent conflicts, but most stepsiblings did not have ongoing disputes, and none of them engaged in violent conflicts. Before stepsiblings could experience conflict with one another three conditions needed to be present: (1) opportunity, (2) intimacy, and (3) similarity. These conditions were often interdependent. For example, the more time the stepsiblings spent together (opportunity), the more they got to know each other (intimacy), and the more their personal similarities and differences (similarity) became apparent.

It should be noted that stepsiblings only exist in *complex stepfamilies* (i.e., both adults have children from prior unions). Complex stepfamilies usually have more individuals and more relationships than do simple stepfamilies. In addition, although some of the stepchildren in this sample knew their stepsiblings as friends or acquaintances prior to parental repartnering, most

had only met one another *because* of their parents repartnering, and so these relationships were involuntarily entered (as opposed to freely chosen). In many ways then, stepsibling relationships are like any new relationship in situations in which individuals are required to participate (e.g., making friends at a new school or at work). For example, one woman reported that she likely would not have been friends with her stepsister if left to her own choice, and in fact she avoided her at school.

Opportunity. On the surface stepsiblings may resemble sibling relationships, but there are differences between stepsiblings and other involuntary peer relationships. One major difference, for instance, is that, unlike siblings that might be seen daily, stepsiblings can vary enormously in how often they are together. It is hard to have disagreements with people that are rarely encountered, which was the case for some stepsibling pairs (e.g., when stepsiblings are grown and on their own, or perhaps residing in another state far away). Shared legal and physical custody arrangements, which are common in the United States, mean that stepchildren may reside in two households, as might their stepsiblings (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). When stepsiblings share a household only periodically, or never share a household but see each other only on holidays or major family events, there are fewer opportunities for them to interact, and therefore fewer chances to disagree or conflict with each other. Instead, they relate as acquaintances and are on their best behavior, or at least they try to avoid making a scene by fighting or arguing.

Age is a possible factor in the opportunities to engage in conflict with a stepsibling. On average, participants gained their stepsiblings on their mother's (M age = 15.05) or father's side (M age = 13.58) during mid-adolescence. At this stage in development, siblings typically understand each other and possess knowledge about each other that assists them in conflict

management (Campione-Barr & Killoren, 2019), but it may have taken them years to reach levels of understanding and knowledge necessary to engage in conflicts while protecting levels of intimacy. Stepsiblings' abilities to get to know each other and develop patterns that may assist in the conflict process are often complicated by having less time spent together pre- and post-stepfamily formation.

Limited opportunities to get to know each other and to interact, results in polite encounters or brief exchanges that are shallow and safe. So, opportunities to interact with stepsiblings are necessary for conflicts to occur, but opportunities are not enough. In addition, there must be a level of intimacy between stepsiblings.

Intimacy. Without feeling a bond with the stepsibling, stepchildren may have little motivation to engage in arguments or disagreements – in order to engage in conflicts, it may be necessary to care about the relationship and possess knowledge about the other person in the dispute. Until stepsiblings bond emotionally, the incentive to engage in the relationship may not be there. In previous studies in which siblings and stepsiblings were compared, stepsiblings often engaged in conflicts less than siblings (Anderson, 1999), and showed less caring (Campo et al., 2012), less support (Mikkelson, Floyd et al., 2011), and engaged in fewer relationship maintenance behaviors (Mikkleson, Myers, et al., 2011). Taken together, the current and prior studies indicate that stepsibling relationships generally may lack the necessary levels of intimacy to invest in the relationship. Investing in relationships includes both affirmative investments (e.g., support, care) and conflicts, which also are an essential part of intimately bonded connections (Canary & Lakey, 2012; McHale et al., 2012).

When differences emerge in interpersonal relationships, the emotional environment in which the relationship exists will influence the way these differences are dealt with (Folger et al,

2005; Lakey & Canary, 2012). Therefore, management strategies may be indicative of stepsiblings' intimacy levels. For example, the stepsiblings who had frequently interacted with and reported close relationships with their stepsiblings also were the ones who reported more frequent conflicts. Although these closer stepsibling relationships had more conflicts, the incidences were perceived as minor (e.g., disrupting television viewing, deciding who would wash dishes, or not muting an alarm clock) the stepsiblings also invested more in the relationship (e.g., attending stepsiblings sporting events or graduations, hanging out without parents). The more a person is invested in a relationship, the greater their ability to minimize conflicts in the relationship (Laursen & Collins, 1994), which explains why these stepsiblings were able to tolerate heightened frequencies of conflict. As a result of their having closer relationships, they were able to minimize these conflicts and did not perceive as detrimental to the relationship.

In open-field relationships, those that are voluntary, interpersonal conflicts may happen early in the process of getting to know each other, and when they do, a person may choose to terminate the relationship. Ending the relationship is generally not an option available to stepsiblings, so instead early conflicts may encourage stepsiblings to stay away from the stepsibling as much as possible.

For stepsiblings, particularly when an emotional bond has not been established between them, any turbulence in the relationship has the potential to make the relational stakes higher for each other, their repartnered parent and stepparent, and perhaps others (e.g., siblings, grandparents). For this reason, stepchildren may be careful monitors of their own behaviors with regard to stepsiblings, wanting to avoid conflicts, if possible, to prevent causing a ripple effect of hostility and fights among others in the stepfamily system.

Similarity. The presence of similarity in a sibling relationship influences the levels of intimacy as well as the frequency of conflict (Campione-Barr & Killoren, 2019), this appeared to be the case for stepsiblings. In order to achieve a sufficient level of intimacy, it helped if stepsiblings found reasons to bond. Having similar interests or being similar in other ways (e.g., close in age) seemed to provide motivation for stepsiblings to spend time together and to get to know each other more intimately. Similarities such as shared interests—sports, technology, and school subjects—gave stepsiblings reasons to become better acquainted. Similarities in individual characteristics like age and gender created more opportunity for conflict, but similarity in age appeared to be more relevant for conflicts than being the same gender. This is not surprising considering stepsiblings' chances of sharing a residence are influenced more by their ages than gender. Full siblings with an age gap of five or more years on average are less intimate and less conflictual (Campione-Barr & Killoren, 2019). In our sample, a stepsister reported being closer to and experiencing more conflict with her stepbrother who was roughly the same age compared her stepsister who was several years older. When participants perceived themselves to have nothing in common with their stepsiblings, they interacted less and also had fewer reasons to disagree or have conflicts.

Not finding enough common ground to bond, lacking sometimes the time and opportunities to bond, and therefore having limited motivation to resolve conflicts, provide the complicated contexts within which stepsiblings develop and maintain relationships with each other. Moreover, pressures to get along well with stepsiblings from interested third parties, such as biological parents and stepparents, also may affect stepchildren's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors towards their stepsiblings. As this study shows, it is simplistic to assume that stepsiblings are prone to conflicts or that they generally are not disposed to have conflicts.

Instead, they have to have ample *opportunities* to interact, a perception that they share *similarities* that motivates their bonding and conflicts, and, finally, perceive some level of *intimacy* in the relationship. This combination allows stepsiblings to feel a sense of freedom to disagree and to try to resolve disputes without threatening the stability of the future of the relationship.

Sources of Conflicts

There were four main sources of stepsibling conflicts: (1) stepsibling behaviors, (2) territory, (3) resources, and (4) differential treatment by parents and stepparents. Only some of these had been reported in previous research and clinical literature on stepsiblings. Sources of conflict somewhat were somewhat influenced by the developmental period (e.g., early childhood, adolescence, young adulthood) at which a stepsibling was gained, age differences between the stepsiblings, and whether stepsiblings ever shared a residence. For instance, differential treatment by stepparents and parents was rarely a source of conflict for stepsiblings whose parents repartnered when they were young adults because these individuals were either not living in the stepfamily household or were financially independent of their parents.

Stepsibling behaviors. A frequently reported source of conflict or cause for “annoyance” were stepsiblings’ behaviors. These ranged from minor irritations (e.g., a stepsibling playing loud music, arguing about what television shows to watch) to major transgressions (e.g., stealing). For stepchildren who reported a “significant” age gap with stepsiblings, it was not clear if the behaviors that created conflicts were intentional or simply the result of differences in maturity – for example, young children were possibly not aware that wanting to follow their adolescent stepsiblings around may be seen as intrusive and irritating.

Personality traits or the temperaments of the stepsiblings often were sources of annoyance and irritation, usually because the stepsiblings were so different in how they lived, interacted with others, and thought about things. These lifestyle differences between the stepsiblings usually were the source of the conflicts. For example, woman who self-described as an introvert was stressed when her outgoing, extroverted stepsister regularly had her many friends hanging out at the house the stepsisters shared; this woman generally liked her stepsister, but they were so different in temperaments that she found this to be a source of anxiety which led to disagreements between them.

There were some deliberate and provocative behaviors by stepsiblings, such as stealing or taunting, that also led to conflicts. Such behaviors were much rarer than the minor daily behaviors that led to annoyances and irritations. For the most part, conflicts due to stepsiblings' behaviors probably are similar to the disputes between biological siblings and may be seen as normative aspects of living in close proximity with others. Stepsibling behaviors as a reason for conflicts is not particularly surprising, given the involuntary nature of these relationships. Individuals who normally would not be interacting with each other were thrust into having to contend with individuals, particularly if they lived together, who were quite different from them.

Territory. Territory as a source of conflict for stepsiblings somewhat reflects findings in sibling conflict literature. Campione-Barr and Smetana (2010) examined conflicts among adolescent siblings and identified issues surrounding personal domain. Personal domain is conceptualized as matters where a sibling encroaches on another's space (e.g., room, friend group, or personal belongings) without permission. Although this source of conflict does not appear to be unique to the stepsibling relationship the construction of meaning and value assigned to their territory may be different.

Long ago, stepfamily clinical scholars John and Emily Visser (2013) contended that “turf” issues were important types of conflicts that stepfamilies would need to resolve. For stepchildren, having some space that they “own,” in particular a bed or a bedroom, is important, and a common source of conflicts with stepsiblings. When two households merge to form a complex stepfamily household, whether stepsiblings co-reside full time or only part of the time, issues of family identity, belonging, and boundaries must be addressed. Having space that can be called their own helps stepchildren feel as if they belong in the household, and having a parent or stepparent make a space for them is layered with meanings related to the stepchild feeling as if they mattered (Papernow, 2013), as if they belong in the stepfamily (Papernow, 2013), and being claimed by stepparents as kin (Marsiglio, 2004). Consequently, disputes over uses of space or other stepfamily members respecting the stepchild’s ownership of space is fraught with emotional baggage in ways that likely would not be as much the case when siblings conflict about space.

Being able to control some territory may be particularly important to stepsiblings, who have been put into these involuntary step-relationships with little or no control over where they reside, and with whom they live. A bedroom or part of a bedroom, in particular, seemed to represent territory that children in complex stepfamilies wanted to control. This also was a way of setting boundaries with stepsiblings and other family members. Having a designated space that was their own was important to the stepsiblings—it meant that they were members of the stepfamily household and within the family’s boundaries— an insider rather than an outsider. Their territory was fraught with meaning, and worth having conflicts over to protect.

Differential treatment. Issues of trust and security may be activated among stepchildren when there is differential treatment of children from previous and current unions by the parent

and stepparent. When a stepchild's biological parent is perceived to provide favorable treatment to stepsiblings, jealousy and anger are common reactions, leading to conflicts with the stepsiblings and, occasionally, with the parent.

Differential treatment is a fairness issue with stepchildren. They expect all children in the stepfamily to be accorded the same discipline, the same rewards, and to be treated the same. When that is not happening, then conflicts occur. Merging two households is challenging, especially when the households have different rules for children and diverse expectations. The adult couple in a stepfamily household often struggle with establishing new rules—when children vary widely in ages and in prior household experiences, creating a middle ground that seems fair to all family members may be difficult (Visher & Visher, 2013). It therefore may not be too surprising that stepchildren may perceive that stepsiblings are receiving lighter punishments or better benefits.

Biological siblings in first marriage families also conflict over differential treatment by parents (McHale et al., 2012). However, for stepsiblings, there are often added issues of trust, relationship security, and boundary ambiguity (i.e., kinship) that come into play. Stepchildren may be particularly sensitive to differential treatment of stepsiblings by their own parent (i.e., the stepsiblings' stepparent). Some prior researchers have documented that stepparents, stepfathers in particular, essentially "trade" sets of children— they actively engage in childrearing for stepchildren with whom they reside while ignoring or neglecting biological children with whom they do not reside (Manning & Smock, 2000). Stepchildren who do not reside full-time with a parent, may be angered when the nonresidential parent acts more like a parent to co-resident stepchildren. It is not surprising that these stepchildren react negatively to these situations, and earlier researchers have reported similar findings (Mikkelsen et al., 2011).

Resources. Conflict theorists have written a great deal about how a scarcity in resources can create competition which can result in conflict (White et al., 2019). Although the stepchildren in this study came primarily from middle class families, the desire for tangible good in a capitalistic society such as the United States is ongoing and constant. Stepchildren competed with stepsiblings over tangible goods like clothes, money, and trips, as well as over intangibles such as parental affection and attention; other researchers have found similar findings in stepfamilies and other family forms (Golish, 2003; White et al., 2019; Mikkelsen et al., 2011).

Conflict Management

Although we did not explicitly explore the outcomes (e.g., were the conflicts resolved?) for each of the conflict management strategies, we can use theory and existing literature to evaluate which of the strategies present could be effective, and which might not. By categorizing these strategies, we can discuss which of these would be more likely to result in constructive or deconstructive conflicts among stepsiblings.

Intrapersonal Conflict Management. To determine if the intrapersonal strategies used by the stepsibling was effective, depends on the stepsiblings' goal. This is best illustrated by the strategy *avoidance*. As described by a stepsister, "My dad was finally happy. I wanted this [marriage] to work for him, so I didn't want to ruffle the waters." If her underlying motivations were to maintain or create balance in the home and to establish harmony and she did so via avoiding conflict with stepsiblings, then her choice in strategy may be considered effective. However, avoidance can become problematic when used too frequently. Opting to avoid conflict can result in problems going unaddressed thus creating a dysfunctional family system overtime (Canary & Lakey, 2012), and counteract the original goal. This management strategy may be most commonly used during the early initial years of a stepfamily's formation that are

characterized by heightened levels of uncertainty, lack of role clarification among members, and an evasion of topics (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Golish & Caughlin, 2002).

Stepsiblings in this sample also engaged in self-soothing activities to manage conflict on an intrapersonal level. This strategy may have a similar impact over time as avoiding, because it was also characterized as a strategy that did not involve addressing the issue at hand. Much like avoidance and self-soothing, stepsiblings who reframed conflicts selected a strategy that would not result in making their goals/needs/annoyances known. However, the impacts of decisions to reframe on relationships are likely determined by the attributions made when the conflict is reframed (Canary & Lakey, 2012). Ascribing a negative and internal attribution, such as believing a stepsibling's behavior was intentionally meant to cause harm or create conflict, can cause emotional distancing (Canary & Lakey, 2012; Vangelisti & Young, 2000), while attributing annoying behaviors to an external force (e.g., a lack of maturity due to age) places blame on something that is out of the stepsibling's control and are more constructive (Canary & Lakey, 2012; Zillmann, 1993). The more positively framed attributions would not likely create emotional distance between the stepsiblings.

Interpersonal conflict management. The choice of interpersonal strategies varied between the stepsiblings. Unlike intrapersonal, interpersonal strategies required the individuals to make their goals, feelings, and conflict known to another party. Although we did not explore the outcomes of these strategies, we speculate that using these was accompanied by risk of hurting the stepsibling relationship, escalating the conflict, or involving more members who were previously bystanders.

Although approaching ones' stepsibling directly was least likely to be reported, when it did occur stepsiblings described communicating in a way that could result in escalating the conflict, such as name calling and blaming the stepsibling. It could be possible for this strategy, *approaching a stepsibling directly*, to be effective and have positive outcomes if it is done in a less aggressive, more cooperative fashion. For example, negotiation, compromise, and discussion are all strategies that require an interpersonal interaction and have been linked to positive family relationships (Canary & Lakey, 2012). The potential for a positive family relationship as an outcome is best represented by a stepsister who explained her motivations for approaching her stepsiblings, "If I were to address [an issue] with my stepsiblings, there's conflict for a little bit but then it is even better because it was addressed. The conflict is over with and we can move on and be better now."

As previously discussed, stepsiblings needed to feel secure in their relationship to experience conflict. Those who perhaps did not feel secure enough to approach stepsiblings directly at the time conflict had occurred, may have opted for venting and third-party mediation, as strategies. These strategies were perceived by stepchildren to reduce the risks of conflicts with stepsiblings, but they had the potential to carry greater risk for whole stepfamily units. *Venting* and *asking a third party to mediate* had the potential for loyalty binds to emerge when the person who is being vented to or asked to mediate with another member of the stepfamily household, specifically the biological parent (Afifi, 2003). Loyalty binds could emerge if the parent feels like they are obligated to side with their child and the stepparent side with theirs, thus dividing the household. To be effective mediators of constructive conflicts the parent and stepparent should maintain a united front, an approach that has been found to be used by functional stepfamilies when boundary tensions occur (Afifi, 2003). Lastly, when parents step in to manage

conflicts without being requested to do so, this strategy illustrates how conflicts in one subsystem can spillover and encompass other subsystems. Again, parents can help manage the issue and promote a constructive conflict, however, the frequency of unrequested parental involvement in stepsibling conflict is unknown.

Study Limitations and Future Direction of Research

All studies have limitations and from these we may provide directions for future research. First, the stepchildren in this study generally were white, well-educated, and from the central United States. Although the goal in GTM research is not to generalize from a sample to a broader population, but to apply findings to others experiencing a similar phenomenon (e.g., in-laws, coworkers, students in a classroom), future research on stepsibling conflicts should examine the phenomenon with a more diverse sample of stepsiblings, including those from racial and ethnic minorities and from poor and working class families. The findings of this GTM study could be examined with a larger sample, allowing researchers to explore linkages between sources of conflict, management strategies, and effectiveness of those strategies. It should be noted that there may be other sources of conflict and other ways of managing conflict that were not identified with this sample

Second, we interviewed individuals who were reflecting on their previous conflict experiences. Consequently, their recollections may have been affected by subsequent knowledge or experiences with their stepsiblings. They also may have forgotten some conflicts and how they were managed. Their reports about conflicts may have differed if interviewed at the time closer to experiencing the conflicts (Laursen & Collins, 1994). Finally, we only interviewed one stepfamily member - it is unknown if stepsiblings, parents, and stepparents in the same family systems would have reported the same behaviors or casual annoyances as sources of conflict, nor

can we confirm how conflicts were managed from the views of other family members. Future studies should strive to include multiple members of the stepfamily in samples to better understand stepsiblings' potential to influence others in the stepfamily household. For instance, some of the findings were similar to those in sibling conflict literature, which may indicate that stepsibling conflict is "normal" to a similar extent. However, findings of sibling literature still cannot be generalized to stepsiblings as this study demonstrates the complexities of the stepsibling system. Interviewing stepsibling pairs could yield more information regarding the conditions for conflict. In addition to this, interviewing multiple members would allow scholars to examine the effectiveness of conflict management strategies for each party involved.

Implications for Practitioners

Practitioners and Parents

The study findings suggest to family practitioners (and to parents) that stepchildren with stepsiblings may need some help in coping with these new (or ongoing) relationships. Clinicians can encourage parents to maintain bonds with their biological children, promote stepsibling bonding, and monitor conflicts between stepsiblings. Clinicians and educators might also help children in complex stepfamilies think about ways in which they can manage a variety of conflicts and interpersonal stressors with stepsiblings.

Maintaining parent-child bonds. Clinicians and researchers have long suggested that remarried or repartnered parents to be sure to spend time with their children from prior unions to maintain those ongoing family bonds (e.g., Papernow, 2013; Visher & Visher, 2013). In addition to maintaining critically important family ties, spending time with children also may reduce their jealousy of stepsiblings and competition between stepsiblings for attention and affection. Parents should not take the close bonds they may have with their children for granted - in the context of

managing new relationships in stepfamilies, maintaining “old” family bonds may indirectly reduce tensions between stepsiblings and help them create closer relationships.

Promoting stepsibling bonds. Practitioners should encourage stepfamilies to not only maintain old family bonds but promote the development of bonds between stepsiblings. It is not realistic to expect that every stepsibling pair will form close and positive relationships, but creating polite and respectful bonds is likely to be achievable and should be the goal, so that when conflict does inevitably occur stepsiblings may feel comfortable enough to manage it or to express their needs.

Giving stepsiblings opportunities to get to know each other is something parents might do for their children. Parents may need to facilitate this bonding process in the early stages of stepsibling relationship development, but stepsiblings also should be allowed/encouraged to develop bonds independent from the parents. Without pressure from a parents’ presence, stepsiblings might feel more comfortable disclosing personal information and increase their intimacy.

Monitoring conflicts. Clinicians might assist parents in being aware of disagreements and disputes among their children from prior unions, with an eye toward helping mitigate or resolve any major conflicts that arise. It also may be beneficial for clinicians to soothe parents who are concerned about conflicts in their stepfamily household by helping parents recognize that some conflict is normal in any relationship. Conflicts are part of any relationship, and may even be beneficial in building close relationships; however, parents should know that if the conflict becomes aggressive or particularly stressful to one or more children, then they need to address this together and find ways to manage the disputes.

The findings from this study suggest that repartnered parents should not necessarily be concerned when stepsiblings are having conflict or be pleased if the stepsiblings never disagree with each other. The complete absence of conflicts between stepsiblings may indicate that they are not emotionally invested in the relationship and therefore do not care enough to correct the source that may be impeding relationship development.

Stepfamilies' relationships would likely benefit when the individuals have a greater understanding about the different conflict management strategies. Family practitioners or family educators might help them with this learning process. By encouraging stepfamilies to involve all members in open family discussions, that may assist in understanding individual patterns for interaction.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A



Are you a stepsibling?



If you answered **“YES”** and are between the ages of 18-25, a team of researchers led by Dr. Larry Ganong is interested in speaking with **YOU!**

We want to hear about your relationship with your stepsiblings

- *Even if you think of them as brothers and sisters, or if you don't think of them as family at all.*

The study consists of an in-person campus interview, which typically lasts between 45 minutes to an hour.

You will receive a \$10 gift card to the Mizzou Store for participating.

If interested, please contact a member of the research team via email at cms4qc@mail.missouri.edu. **Please include your name and indicate your interest in the “Stepsibling Study”** in the email.

Appendix B

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. Information collected as part of the research will not be used or distributed for future research studies. 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 573-882-3181 with any questions about research involving human participants. If you want to talk privately about your rights or any issues related to your participation in this study, you can contact University of Missouri Research Participant Advocacy by calling 888-280-5002 (a free call), or emailing MUResearchRPA@missouri.edu. Thank you!

Appendix C
Stepsibling Conflict
Interview Protocol

Purpose Statement: To explore stepsibling conflict processes

Research Questions – here is how I would start (the RQs with which I would begin the study)_

What do stepsiblings have conflicts about?

Under what conditions do stepsiblings conflict/disagree?

When do they have conflicts?

Why do they have conflicts?

What are the contexts within which stepsiblings have conflicts?

What roles, if any, do biological parents and stepparents play in stepsibling conflicts (e.g., do they instigate, mediate, try to resolve, ignore, what, if anything?)

- In what ways do opportunity, similarity, and familiarity effect the stepsibling conflict?
 - Examine the impact of time spent together on conflict
 - Understand the role a stepsibling's similarity or differences in personality and interest act as a catalyst for conflict
 Examine perceived closeness among stepsiblings and the role it plays in the way conflict is managed

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 re-partnered? If so, did stepparents have children from previous relationships? Have your biological parent and stepparent 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.

Stepsibling Relationships

- Tell me about the first time you met your stepsibling(s). How old were you? Where did this meeting take place? How did you feel about meeting them? What were your first impressions of them? What do you think their first impressions of you were? What, if anything, did your parents do to either help or hinder you building relationships with your stepsiblings? In what ways have these impressions changed over-time, why do you think they changed?
 - If you knew your stepsibling before parents' re-partnering, tell me about your relationship before parents became a couple. In what ways has the relationship with your stepsibling changed since parents became a couple?
- When and how did you learn that your parent and stepparent were getting married? How did you feel about that? When did you meet your stepparent? Tell me about that experience.
- What did you think and feel when you found out you would have new stepsiblings? In what ways did your expectations end up being true and in what ways were they not at all true?
 - If not, what was is about you and your stepsibling (and parents) that may have helped avoid those fears coming true? Instead of asking this, which is you following your own thoughts down a rabbit hole, is to first ascertain from them what the stepsib relationships are like – close and warm, distant, ambiguous, like polite acquaintances, whatever. Then, ask some open ended question designed to get their thinking about what contributed to making those relationships what they were. “What contributed to this?” “Why do you think your relationships with _____ were they way you just described?” What did you do to shape the relationship/make it this way? What did your stepsib do to make your relationships so _____? What about your parents and stepparent – how were they involved in how your stepsibling relationships developed?
- What were the custody arrangements for you and your stepsibling(s)? How often did you have contact with/communicate with your stepsibling(s)? Tell me about the nature/quality of that contact.
 - Was the custody the same from throughout the time you shared a household with your stepsibling? How did spending more or less time together effect your relationship with your stepsibling?
 - Tell me about the average or typical conversation you would have with your stepsibling.

- Do you feel some subjects or types of conversations are safer than others? What kinds of topics may result in conflict?
- Did you or your stepsiblings (or both) have to move as a result of the remarriage? How did you feel about those new living arrangements?
 - If they mention feeling jealous or tensions, then explore this.
 - How did you feel about your stepsibling having a larger room or a new room, how did you express this? Why did you express it the way that you did? What were the alternative outcomes if you had expressed this differently (positive or negative)?
- Describe a “typical day” when you and your stepsiblings were together in the same household. Start with getting up in the morning and describe the day.
- Now describe a “typical day” when your stepsiblings were not in the household (this will only be relevant for participants with stepsiblings that spent time with another residential parent). How was daily life similar or different when your stepsiblings were in the household or not?
- When you were growing up, what kinds of activities did you do with your stepsibling(s)? Who initiated those activities? (e.g., you, your stepsibling(s), your parent, your stepparent?)
- How do you think your relationship with your stepparent influences your relationship with your stepsibling(s)? (*E.g., if they have a close relationship with their stepparent, ask how their feelings toward their stepparent affect how they feel about their stepsiblings*).
- How does your stepsibling’s relationship with your parent influence your relationship with your stepsibling?
 - Tell me about a time you and your stepsibling may have been treated differently by your parent.
 - Can you describe the quality of your stepsibling and your biological parent’s relationship?
- How do you define conflict? Do you think conflict is experienced differently depending on the relationship, why?
 - If your biological sibling (if they have one) annoyed you, how would you address it? If your stepsibling did the exact same thing how would you address it? Can you tell me more about this?

- How would you describe your conflict style? In other words, how do you usually handle disagreements with people in your lives? Can you give me some examples? (use this as a probing question, regardless of what they say in response to the “style” question)
- Disagreements and conflicts between children in a family are common and normal. Some research suggest conflict between siblings can help children develop interpersonal skills. Describe any conflicts, tensions, or annoyances with your stepsibling(s)? Tell me about the nature of those interactions.
 - If they said they never had disagreements and conflicts, ask “Why do you think you and your stepsiblings did not conflict with each other?”
 - If they experienced disagreements with some stepsiblings but not others, explore their thoughts about why they disagreed with some but not others. Of course, if they had conflicts, we would ask what they were about, how frequent, how they were resolved, when, where, etc. We want to get as complete a picture as we can.
 - How were these flare ups resolved? How often did parents have to get involved? Please describe a time your parents did step in and deal with the conflict? If your parent did step in, do you feel like the conflict was resolved?
 - What are some ways to a conflict is truly resolved?
- What are some risks you think would accompany a conflict between you and your stepsibling?
- How similar in personality were you and your stepsibling(s)? Did the similarities or differences ever cause problems in your relationship?
 - In what ways did you and your stepsibling(s) differ in attitudes about school and school work? Extra-curricular activities?
- How would you compare yourself to your stepsibling? How would others (family or friends) compare to your stepsibling, either interest, hobbies, or personality? How does it feel when these comparisons are made?
- Tell me about some things you have in common with your stepsibling? What about differences? If you can, please describe a time you may have attributed conflict to these qualities.
- If you and your stepsiblings had activities or events that overlap, how would your parents decide to go or not to go to these things? Did you attend your stepsibling’s events (i.e. sports, graduation, concerts), did they attend yours, if so, what did that mean for you?

- When you were upset with how things were going in your stepfamily, what did you do? Did you reach out to your stepsiblings? Did you withdraw from them and the family?
 - *Note from Dr. Coleman: I added these questions because so many researchers using big data sets talk about those with step and half sibs having more external and internal problems. I think we need to try and get out where those problems originate. I will think more about this and how to get to those behaviors.*
 - When your stepsibling annoyed you, who would you tell? Can you describe what these conversations looked like and how did it feel to express it?
 - Tell me about your reasoning for dealing with conflict the ways that you did?
 - What could have happened if you dealt with your emotions internally versus externally (or vice versa)?
 - If your stepsibling was bothering or upsetting you, is there someone in your family you would confide in? Tell me about this person and why you would share this with them?

- On a scale of 1-10 how well do you know your stepsibling? Why did you choose the number that you did, has this changed over time? Were you closer as children or as adults?

- Are there things only you know about your stepsibling that your parents don't, and if so, why do think you have access to this information?

- What are some of the topics of conversation you have with your stepsibling?

- Can you describe a time you confided in your stepsibling? Why or why don't you feel more comfortable exploring deeper conversations with your stepsibling?

- What kinds of chores/household tasks did you have to do as a child? Who enforced them? What kinds of chores/tasks did your stepsiblings have to do? Did the same person make sure they did their chores?
 - If your stepsibling did not complete their chores, but you did, and nothing came of it, what would you do?

- Can you tell me about a time you and your stepsibling had the same behavior with different outcomes?
 - If 'punished' differently then tell me about why you think you treated differently.

- Describe your stepsiblings [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 persons without "roles" and other social science language creeping in. Who are they as people? If you had

to choose 5 words to describe your stepsibling (ask for each one), what would those words be? (Ask them to explain why they chose the words they selected).

- How, if at all, have your relationships with your stepsiblings changed over time? Were there any emotional turning points in your relationships with your stepsiblings? (e.g., an event that brought you closer together or something that drove you apart?). What kind of relationship would you like to have with them?
 - Follow up with questions like, “How have you achieved that?” or “What has gotten in the way of achieving that kind of relationship?”
- Do you consider your stepsibling(s) to be part of your 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 stepsiblings (e.g., “I have one biological brother and one stepbrother”) or do they group siblings together (e.g., “I have two brothers.”)*)
 - *How do you describe your family to people you have just met? Who gets mentioned and who does not?*
- Did / would you invite your stepsibling(s) to your wedding? If your parent’s remarriage ended, would you invite your stepsibling(s) to your wedding? Why or why not?
- Imagine yourself and your stepsiblings in 10 years. What do you think your relationships with them will be like in 10 years?
- How would your relationships with your stepsibling(s) change (if at all) if your parent and stepparent divorced? Would you stay in touch with them? Why or why not? If they would stay in touch with some stepsiblings but not others, explore this with them.
- What kinds of things does your stepsibling do for you? What do you do for them?
- Some research suggests that children who grow up with half- or stepsiblings experience more problems (in school, in life, in relationships) than do 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?

Figure 1.1

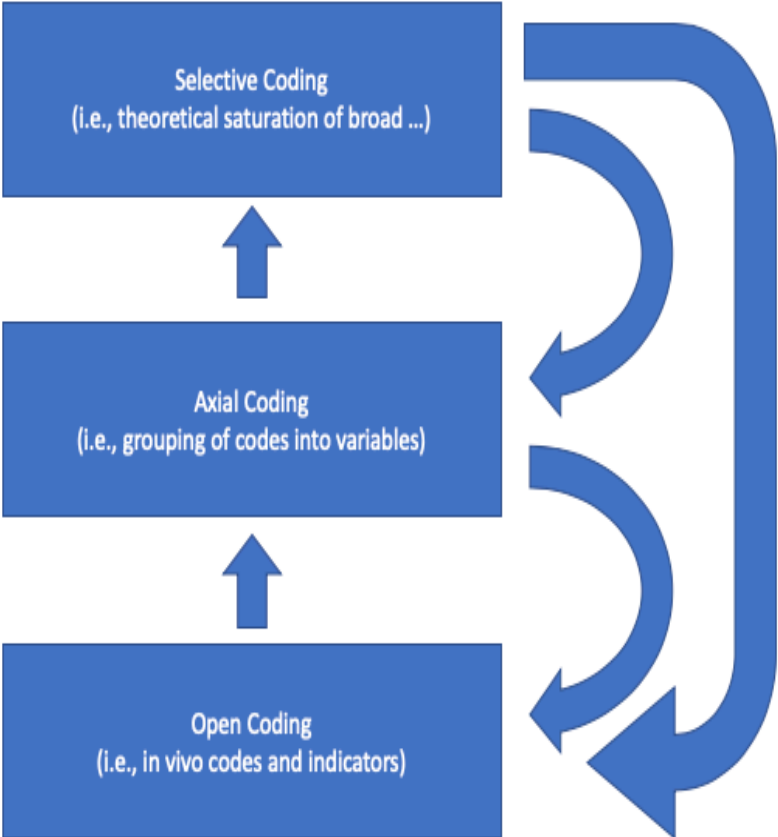


Table 1. Stepsiblings and their Stepfamilies

ID Gender Age	Race of participant and family members	Age at Dissolution/ Physical Custody	Age of Mom's repartner or remarriage	Sibling structure on Mom's side	Age of Dad's repartner or remarriage	Sibling structure on Dad's side	Full Sib- lings	How are Step- siblings Defined?
100 (M,21)	white	9 Joint	12 cohabiting	NA	13 rem	SS-19 SS-17 SS-15	FS-27	Siblings
101 (M,20)	white	10 Joint	NA	NA	16	SB-14 SS-11 SB-7 HS-4 HB-2	0	Siblings
102 (F,21)	white	9 Mom	16 rem	HS- 31 HS-29 Mom was married once before parents of 102 and HS are from that marriage	13	SS-27 SS-21	FS- 14	Stepsiblings
103 (F,21)	white	6 Mom	9 rem	SS-30 SS-27 SB-23	13 rem (4 th marriage for dad)	SS-35 SS-30	FB-23 FS-26	Stepsiblings, family
104 (F,21)	African American?	3 mom Separated, never married (2 nd union)	11 rem	HB-29 (from 1 st union) SS-18 (from 3 rd union)	18 rem (10 when cohabiting began)	SS-17	0	SS17 Sib SS18 Not family
105 (F,19)	white	9 mom, 2 nd marriage for both parents	17	HB-30 (from 1 st mar) HB-29 (from 1 st mar)	17	SB-20 (from 3 rd mar) SS-17 (from 3 rd mar)	0	Family definitions are contextual
106 (F,19)	white	1 mom (separated, never married)	NA	NA	16	SB- 9 SB- 7 HB- 10 months HB-10 months	0	Siblings; family
107 (F, 22)	white	6 mom	21	SB-25 SS-24 SB-22	13	HB- 5	0	Sibling; stepsibling; not family (it varies per stepsib)
108 (F, 21)	Biracial, Asian American stepkin and biokin	9 mom	20	SS-18 SS-16	18	SS-13 SS-10	FB-23 FS-18	stepsiblings
109 (F, 19)	white	9 mom	11	SS-19 SB-15	Had remarried but now divorced	ESB-5 ESB-3	FB-16	Family, reluctantly
110 (F, 22)	white	17 mom	21 engaged	SB-age unknown	21	SB-29	FS-20	Mat. SB: not family; Pat. SB: Acquaintanc e

111 (F,19)	White, Latina stepkin	3 mom	5 cohabiting	SB-35 SS- 25-35	9 rem	HS-11 SS-18 SB-16	FS- 21	Mat. SS: not family; Mat. SB: family; Paternal: siblings, family
112 (F,24)	White, Asian American stepkin	3 mom	14 (had HB from prior union, now has 2 SC from rem)	HB-19 ----- SS-14 SB-23	9 rem (dad has remarried twice after 112's mom)	HB-12 HB-10 HS-6 SS-17	0	Siblings; family
113 (F,24)	white	12 mom	14 (dad was married once before and once after marriage to 113's mom)	SS-36 SB-34	??	HS-40 HS-37 HS-39 HS-36 HS-36	FB-22	Stepsibling; family
114 (F,19)	African American	4 separated (never married) - mom	14	HB-23	10	SS-15 HS-13 HS-2 HS-1	0	Sibling; family
115 (F,19)	white; African American stepkin	7 joint	NA	NA	13	HS-36 HB-33 SS-23 SB-20	FS-26 FS-23	Stepsiblings; not family
116 (F,20)	white	12 dad	deceased	NA	16	SS-25 SS-23	FS-18	Siblings; family
117 (F,24)	white	12 joint	14 rem	SB-30 SS-28	NA	NA	FB-26	Stepsiblings; Not family
118 (F,27)	white	2 mom	6 rem	HB-19 SB-28 SB-26	10	SS-36 SS-31 HB-NR HB-NR	0	Stepsiblings; Not family
119 (M,24)	white	13 mom	21	SB-36 SS-32 SS-30	Dad has been married 7 times; was 22 most recent	SS-35 SS-33 SS-dec HB-dec HB-39	FB-26 FS-21 FB-20	Not family
120 (F,22)	white	10 dad	Deceased	NA	14	SS-17 SB-13 SB-13	FB- 24	Not family
121 (M,24)	white	9 joint	19	SB-33 SS-31	9 cohabiting	SB-30 SS-28	FB-27	Not family
122 (F, 19)	White	15 mom	17	SB-16 SS-10	Deceased	NA	FB-20	Stepsiblings, sometimes siblings; family
123 (F,19)	white	15 dad	19 rem	SS-22 SS-20 SB-18	NA	NA	FS-22 FS-21 FS-17 FS14	Not family
124 (F,20)	white	16 mom	20 rem	SS-24 SS-18	NA	NA	FB-21	Stepsiblings (were SF's daughters)